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*And, this was the baby's grandmother!*

THE  
BABY'S GRANDMOTHER

BY

L. B. WALFORD

AUTHOR OF "MR. SMITH: A PART OF HIS LIFE," "COUSINS,"  
"TROUBLESOME DAUGHTERS," "PAULINE," "NAN,"  
"A MERE CHILD," ETC. ETC.

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# SECTION.

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# THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER.

## CHAPTER I.

"COME, ADVISE ME, BROTHER."

"But fixed before, and well resolved was she,  
As those who ask advice are wont to be."

—POPE.

BEAUTY, health, ease, and a charming temper, had all combined to hide from an inquisitive world the years that Matilda Wilmot had spent upon it. She looked young—she *was* young. If her skin was as fair, her eyes as bright, and her tresses as luxuriant as they had been twenty years before, not less was her blood as impetuous and her fancy as warm. She still walked, rode, danced, and skated with the best—was the star of the neighbourhood, the theme of every busy tongue, the envy of every jealous heart; and one abominable fact undid it all—Lady Matilda was, O heavens! a grandmother.

"It is the most ridiculous thing," said her brother,—and Teddy did not relish ridiculous things in connection with himself and his belongings,—“it is the worst piece of luck that could have happened, that baby coming. Puts us all in the stupidest position. Just as if you and I were not laughed at enough already, the way we go on. Oh, I know, I know well enough They say we're a queer

lot, and that sort of thing ; and it will be worse than ever after this. I say, you know, we must do something ; its no use staring at each other, and doing nothing to help ourselves. We shall be quizzed all over the place."

"So we shall." Matilda looked him in the face without the shadow of a smile. "What are we to do? Come, advise me, brother. Think of something quickly, please."

"Ah, but that's it. It's easy to say, 'Think of something ;' but what the dickens am I to think of? There is only one way out of the scrape that I see, and that is for you to marry again, and cut the whole concern here."

"I have been married enough already," rejoined his sister. "Try again, my dear. Your prescription does not suit the complaint, doctor."

"Complaint! Well, I am glad to hear you have the sense to complain at least. 'Pon my word, it's too bad. However, all I can say is, you marry again."

"And all *I* can say is, I have been married once too often as it is."

"You women have no logic about you," burst forth Teddy, impatiently. "Can't you see, now, that having had one bad husband at the start, it's long odds but you get a better to go on with? Can't you see that? Bless me! it's as plain as a pike-staff. It stands to reason."

"Very true; to be sure, it stands to reason. But, my dear brother, 'better' is a vague term. How much 'better,' I should like to know? And then you evidently contemplate my taking a course of husbands, increasing in excellence as I 'go on' with them. Pray, how many will be required?"

"Good gracious! You *are* unreasonable. I never said such a thing. Why, you might hit on the very man for you the very next time."

"I might, certainly."

"And then—there you are."

"True; then—there I am."

"Well, but," proceeded Lady Matilda, with infinite gravity, "supposing, Teddy,—just supposing, for the sake of prudence, you know,—you are always telling me that I am not so prudent as I ought to be, so I intend to make an effort in future,—supposing, then, that I did not?"

"Did not what?"

"Hit on the right man."

"Well, of course—of course," said Teddy, slightly flustered, as was natural, by the suggestion,—“of course, you know, you must take your chance. I tell you, it's long odds in your favour, but I can't say more than that. No man can say more than that. If you marry again——”

"In the abstract. Yes."

"In the abstract? Yes." He had not a notion, poor boy, what she meant, for Teddy was simple, very simple, as perhaps has been already gathered. "In the abstract, if you like. You marry again, anyway; and then—there we are."

"Then—there we are," repeated Lady Matilda, with the same cheerful enunciation and the same immovable countenance as before; "but, pardon me, dear Ted, explain a little—how?"

"Don't you see how? I'll soon show you, then. When you marry, I can come and live with you, and we can live anywhere you choose,—I am sure I don't care where, so long as it isn't here——"

("Abstract husband, no vote," *sotto voce* observed Matilda.)

"We could go far enough away," proceeded her brother; "we could now, if we had a little more money—if we had not to hang on to Overton. I can't make out sometimes," with a little puzzled expression,—“I can't quite make out, Matilda, how it is that we haven't more

money between us. I thought you had married a rich man."

"Oh, never mind—never mind that; we know all about that." Lady Matilda spoke rather hastily. "Money is not interesting to either of us, Ted, and I want to hear more about your plan. Tell me what we should do when we had gone away from here, and where to go, and why go at all?"

"As to what we should do! We should do very well. I don't know what you mean by that. And then it's easy enough settling where to go. There are heaps of places, very jolly places, that I could get to know about, once I was on the look-out for them. Places always crop up once you are on the look-out; any one will tell you that."

"And now, why should we go at all?"

"Why?" Teddy opened his eyes, and stared at his sister. "Why? Have I not been telling you why all this time? I do believe you think I like to talk on, for talking's sake." (She did, but never let him know as much, listening patiently till the stream had run dry; but on this occasion Teddy was too sharp, and the subject was too engrossing.) "Why? To get quit of it, of course," he said.

"Of it? Of what?"

"That disgusting baby."

"Are you speaking of my grandson, sir? Are you talking of a hapless infant only a few hours old, you unnatural monster? Shame upon you! fie upon you, young man! Pray, Mr Edward Sourface, reserve such epithets in future for other ears; and be so good, sir, at the same time, to draw off some of the vinegar which is visible in your countenance, and let me have it presently as a fitting accompaniment to the oil which we shall see exhibited in that of my trusty and well-beloved son-in-law—since one will counteract the other, and thus shall I better be able

to digest both. Why, Teddy, what an idiot you are!" said Lady Matilda, dropping all at once her mocking accents, and speaking gently and playfully; "what an ado you make about the simplest and most natural thing in the world! I am married at eighteen, so of course Lotta improves on the idea, and marries *before* she is eighteen. I have a daughter, she has a son: in every way my child has followed the lead given her, and indeed eclipsed her mother from first to last."

"Fiddlesticks! Eclipsed her mother! *Lotta!*" cried Teddy, with undisguised contempt. "*Lotta!*" he said again, and laughed.

"Oh, Teddy, Teddy, you are not a good uncle. How can you laugh in that unkind way? Be quiet, sir—be quiet, I tell you; I won't have it. From a grand-uncle, too! Grand-uncle! Think of that, Teddy, love. Dear, dear,—'tis really vastly surprising, as the old ladies say."

"Vastly—something else," muttered Teddy.

"Mr Grand-uncle," began the teasing voice.

"Oh, shut up, can't you? Grand-uncle!" said Teddy, with such distaste that it seemed he loathed the very term, independently of its adherence to himself—"grand-uncle! Was there ever such bosh? It really——"

"What I was going to say was," pursued his sister, merrily, "that as the baby is a boy,—and youths under twenty do not usually affect matrimony in this country,—I may be permitted to entertain some hopes that I shall not be converted into a great-grandmother with the same delightful celerity with which I have already been turned into a grandmother."

Then there was a pause, during which the brother looked gloomily out of the window, while the sister found apparently a more agreeable prospect in her own thoughts, for she smiled once or twice before she spoke again. At last she rose from her seat. "I shall go over this afternoon, of course," she said.



"Over to Endhill?"

"Yes."

"Over to see that baby?"

"Yes."

"What on earth—do you really mean it? Are you really going to waste a whole afternoon slobbering over a wretched baby?"

"Only about ten minutes of it, dear; don't be cross; I shall not ask to see Lotta, as she had better be quiet——"

"——When is she over anything else?"

"So we can just ride over, come back through the town, see what is going on, and have a fine gallop along the cliffs afterwards."

Now if there was one thing in the world Teddy Lesingham loved, it was to see what was going on in the old county town near which he had been born and bred; and if there was another, it was a gallop along the high chalky downs when the tide was full, and the sea-wind was blowing the waves right up over the beach beneath. Still he made a demur; he looked at the sky, and looked at Matilda,—“We shall get wet, of course.”

“Of course. Old clothes. It will do us no harm.”

“I don't mind, I am sure, if you don't. What time then?” For though the young man had not been formally invited to go, let alone being consulted as to the expedition, it was assumed, indeed it was as much a matter of course that he was to be Matilda's companion as the horse she rode. To be sure he was. Where could he have gone but where she went? What could he have done that she would not have a part in? He never had a purpose apart from hers: her will was his law; her chariot-wheels his chosen place.

Nor was the widow less ardently attached to her young brother. She, the quickest-witted woman in the neighbourhood, never lost patience with, never wearied of, her

poor foolish Teddy, who, as was pretty well known, was not *quite* like other people, and yet was so very little wrong, wanting in such a very slight degree, that it was almost a shame to mention it,—and yet, if the truth were told, it was perhaps even more awkward and trying in some ways than if there had been more amiss. For Teddy considered himself to be a very knowing and remarkably wide-awake fellow. On his shoulders, he felt, rested a heavy weight of responsibility, and cares manifold devolved on his far-reaching mind. For instance, who but he kept up the whole social credit of Overton Hall in the eyes of the world? Did he not entertain strangers, remember faces, do the civil to the neighbourhood generally, whereas Overton and Matilda never thought of such things? Overton was "a very good brother, a precious good brother, and he was not saying a word against him;" but without saying a word against him, it is certain that the speaker felt and was scarcely at pains to conceal his sense of his own superiority. Overton, he would complain, had no idea of keeping things up to the mark—had no *nous*, no *go* in him; whereas Matilda, poor Matilda (here he would wag his head with sombre sagacity)—poor Matilda was such a flighty, here-there-everywhere, happy-go-lucky, devil-may-care sort of creature, that if it were not for *him*,—oh, it was no wonder Teddy had a serious aspect, all things considered.

Perhaps Matilda was at times diverted and at times provoked; but at any rate she took care that no one else should be either one or the other in her presence. In everything she supported and fortified her brother. He lectured her, and she listened dutifully. He put forth his wisdom, and it was met by gentle raillery or grave assent. His wildest assertions, his most pitiful arguments, were softened, smoothed, and helped tenderly out of the conversation,—so that even those who liked the fair Matilda least—and they were women, we may be

sure—even those allowed that she was wonderfully, extraordinarily “nice” with Teddy.

Now Teddy could be irritating. There were times when he would be sharp, sharp as a needle, and sharp inevitably at the wrong moment and in the wrong way. The thing that it was particularly desirable that he should not see, and should know nothing about, he would perceive by intuition—and that, however absent-minded and dull and stupid he might have seemed but the moment before. There was no evading his penetration, and no putting him off the scent once he struck it: he saw like a lynx, and heard like a Red Indian, when it suited him.

Then perhaps when such smartness was particularly mischievous in its results, and Teddy would meet with the mildest of rebuffs from those whom he had so wantonly maltreated, he would be very highly aggrieved indeed. Perhaps the rebuff might never even come to be spoken, but a something in the air would show that all was not well, and this was enough; he was out of favour, and he was bound to show resentment; nor, when he thus took the bit between his teeth, could all the united efforts of Overton and Matilda dislodge it. He was not to be either cajoled or coerced out of his mood. Silence, obstinate, unyielding, leaden-weighted silence, would be his refuge; and while the fit lasted, which it might do for days at a time, neither the earl nor his sister had much peace of mind. Vague misgivings would creep into their bosoms and betray their presence by uneasy whispers and glances, if Teddy's whereabouts were unknown for any length of time: if he lingered out of doors after the great bell had sounded from the tower at luncheon-time or dinner-time, one would be at the staircase window, and another looking casually out of the front door. They would watch him disappear across the park, and when once the tall handsome figure was out of

sight, and Teddy could have no suspicion that he was being spied upon, one or other would be pretty sure to follow, and be merely strolling about in the same direction, if by chance they were obliged to let him see he was not alone. He would not address the intruder on his solitude. He would look angrily away, mutter to himself, and pass on. The servants would understand that Mr Edward was in a "temper," and avoid him; his very dog would make no efforts to engage his notice.

But this is Teddy at his worst. These ugly days are few and far between,—thank God they are, or what might they not lead to? They come but seldom, and go as they come, unquestioned, unblamed. Gradually the cloud begins to roll away, a softer look steals back to the face, the lips part in a smile, the whistle to Gruff brings Gruff rampant to his master's side, and it is plain that all is to be right again.

Overton nods to Matilda, and she nods back. Overton addresses Teddy as though nothing had happened, and Matilda takes it for granted that he will join her in some little jaunt or other, previously arranged and ready to be brought forward,—and they both talk away to him and take his arm, and pat him on the back, just as if he had not persistently avoided their company as much as he could for the last thirty or forty hours, and had not, when compelled to endure it, maintained an unbroken, sullen, affected unconsciousness of their presence. That is past, and he may be approached again. He looks a little anxious, a little ashamed: a vague feeling of having been naughty oppresses the lad as it would a child, and his spirits gratefully rise as he perceives he is not to be punished for his misbehaviour. If Overton were cold to him, or, worse still, were Matilda to quarrel with him, all Teddy's happiness in life would be gone, for these two beings people his world, and in their unfailing forbearance and affection he basks as in sunshine.

"Yet Mr Edward talks sensible enough," avers the old major-domo of Overton Hall, who has known Mr Edward from his cradle. "I've seen folks as taken as they could be with Mr Edward, I can tell you ; and my lord not being married, nor looking that way, there's many would jump at the young one on the chance. Lord bless you, he ain't far wrong, not by no means ! he is just a bit simple and foolish like ; but who's to know that that sees him in company ?—such a fine well-set-up young gentleman to look at, a-talking here, a-talking there, always quite easy and comfortable, and dressed—there ain't a better-dressed gentleman in London. For one coat of my lord's Mr Edward have half-a-dozen ; and as to trousers, Joseph here tells me he wouldn't like to give a guess even at what his trouser bill is. My lord, he pays : bless you, he don't say nothing to nobody, but he just pays and keeps the receipts. He ain't as poor as Mr Edward thinks, d'ye understand ? 'Twould never do to let Mr Edward have every suvering *he* wanted, or we should soon be in the workhouse ; but he gets his little bit of money that his father left him, just to make believe, d'ye see ? He gets it paid regular down, and he fusses over it, and thinks it's all he have to live upon,—and to be sure he can see well enough 'tis but a trifle,—so that just keeps him down nicely. To hear him sometimes telling folks how poor he is ! But he forgets, you know,—he forgets, does Mr Edward. Lor' ! you may talk to him by the hour together, and he don't know nothing at the end. Tell him a thing, and he takes it in all right enough ; but it just goes through and through his head without stopping—in at the one ear and out at the other, before any good or bad comes of it. If it weren't for Lady Matilda——," and the old man shook his head.

It was in this light that the Hon. Edward Lessingham was looked upon by the inmates of Overton Hall.

## CHAPTER II.

"YET YOU USED TO SEEM HAPPY."

"A coronet, my lord goes by,  
My lady with him in the carriage,—  
You'd never guess from that proud eye  
It was a miserable marriage."

--ANON. †

And now we must more formally introduce our readers to Overton Hall itself, and to the three representatives of the Overton family now alone remaining, since they were, one and all, so far from being unremarkable, that in any rank, among any associates, they must still have attracted notice. As it was, as the first people of the place, they were an unfailing source of gossip, conjecture, and comment in a particularly barren and unfruitful neighbourhood. Providence had been kind to the parish in bestowing on it such a patron as Lord Overton, and such a pair as Teddy and Matilda for his brother and sister. No three people could have done more for the dull out-of-the-way old-world part they lived in, and that involuntarily; for, truth to tell, it was not all the money they gave away, the schemes they organised, the example they set, which was half so much valued among the villagers as their freaks and fancies, their whims and vagaries, their doings and sayings, their goings and comings,—these were the real benefit, the real, actual, positive benefit which was conferred, and for which gratitude was due.

Overton Hall, far from the busy world—at least as far as it is possible to be in England in these highly strung and terribly communicative days—four miles from a small and sleepy wayside station, in plainer terms, was sunk in a hollow (though Lady Matilda would never allow as

much)—was, at any rate, far down the slope of a long low Sussex hillside; and although pleasant enough as a summer residence, was looked upon by all but its inhabitants as absolutely unendurable after the fall of the leaf. When October had once fairly set in, the park would be a series of swamps, over which faint blue mists hung incessantly; the red walls of the old Elizabethan mansion would be visible for miles on every side when the thin scrubby woodlands around had been stripped of their foliage; and it had been said over and over again that no people but the Overtons themselves, no residents less pertinaciously attached to their native place, would ever have lived on through winter after winter in such a dreary spot.

That they did so, however, from choice, was a priceless boon to those who, from necessity, followed their example. So little of the Overtons went such a long way; they were so rich in resources in themselves, so replete with material for the wits of others to work upon; one was so unlike the other, and all were so unlike the rest of their neighbours,—that the one universal feeling was, that they could never have been replaced, had any evil chance taken them away. What they did, and what they left undone, was of almost equal interest; why Lord Overton took a morning instead of an afternoon walk, made talk for half-a-dozen tongues. What carriages went from the Hall to meet such and such a train? When they returned? Who were in them? Was Teddy seeing the guests off when he was met driving down on the following day; or were they stopping over Sunday? All of this was food for ardent speculation; and the erection of new park palings, or a fresh lodge at the edge of the low wood, was not of more vital importance than the health of Matilda's sick parrot, or the consideration as to the length of time her whimsical ladyship had worn her one bonnet in church.

Although all three were thus constantly before their public, it, however, by no means followed that they were on the same footing in the public mind; and strange to say, the elder brother, the least striking, the least notable as he was of any, had to him the *pas* given; but then the case stood thus: Lord Overton was one whom no one—except, perhaps, the very very few who had known him closely from boyhood—believed in. He was, at the time our story commences, in the prime of life—that is to say, he was forty years old, and looked his age. He was short, stumpy, plain, and worse than plain, coarse in feature, and marked, though but slightly, with small-pox. He was, in fine, not passively, but aggressively ill-favoured; not insignificant, not one who might have been cast in a mould whence hundreds more of the same could be turned out to order if required, but he was the unfortunate possessor of a face which might have been constructed upon trial, and found so unsatisfactory as to have been never reproduced.

But then he was the Earl of Overton. What signified it to the Earl of Overton how he looked, or of what formation was his nose, or chin, or mouth? What did it matter that he shambled in his walk, slouched in his chair, and sat inches lower than his sister? What though he had not Teddy's easy grace and swinging step, nor the bell-like tones of Matilda's voice? He was the Earl of Overton. These things were, or ought to have been, considerations quite beneath the Earl of Overton. In virtue of the solitary possession birth, he should have been more potent than the Apollo Belvidere, or the sage Æsop. He should not have supposed it possible that he could look amiss, or act amiss, or talk too much or too long.

Nobody could believe that he did think it possible; and thus it was that, as we have said, nobody believed in the man himself.



He was a mystery—a cynic; he was proud as Lucifer; he was mad as a March hare. It was said of him that not all his ancestors for generations back had held themselves so high as he did. He was dubbed a recluse and a monk; while, to carry out the pleasant suggestion, the Hall itself would be termed the monastery (but if it were one, like unto some in the olden time it must have been, when monks were merrier than they are now). This, however, is an aside between the reader and the writer,—in the eyes of the good folk round the simile was apt. But what puzzled them a little, and set one or two thinking, was this, that after all, though everything that was heard of Lord Overton bespoke him proud, stern, and self-contained—after all, if you met the earl face to face, if he *had* to look at you and *had* to speak to you, his look was wonderfully meek and his voice gentle.

Now Lord Overton thought no more of himself than if he had been a city scavenger. That was the real truth, and in that truth lay the perplexity. People could not understand, would not, indeed, credit for a single second the notion that so great a man could be humble-minded.

And how came it that he was so? Probably after this fashion. His parents had been vain, selfish, and ambitious; and they could ill brook the idea that their first-born, their heir, the future head of the house, should give no promise of bringing to it either honour or repute. Overton had from infancy been awkward, ugly, and illiterate. There was no hope that he would shine either as a politician, or as a courtier, or as a soldier, or as—in short, anything. Teddy had eclipsed him in beauty, Matilda in intellect, and the latter had been the father's, the former the mother's darling. With neither had he been in the smallest degree of consequence, over neither had he possessed any influence, and they had only noticed his being the eldest as a fresh source of vexation, since he did the position so little credit.

It had all sunk deeply into a nature already reserved, bashful, and backward.

Not all the subsequent fuss about the peer in possession; not all the flattery of time-servers, anxious to worship the risen sun; not even time and reflection, could shake Overton's conviction that he was a nobody, and would always be a nobody.

It was impossible, Matilda said, to open her eldest brother's eyes. He could never see that he was needed, never suppose that he could be wanted.

For instance, it was tolerably palpable when old Lady Finsbury—the dear old dowager who lived in the very small house along the London Road—when the old lady herself drove to the Hall on purpose to secure the party for a little dinner—such a little dinner as she could give and liked to give,—it was plain that the presence of Overton himself on the occasion was not only desired, but was of first-rate importance. He was more than wanted, he was anxiously, painfully wanted,—but the idea never occurred to him that it could be so. He thought it very kind, uncommonly kind, of Lady Finsbury to ask them all; but three out of one house were quite too many for her little room—(Lady Matilda winced and looked at the speaker, but he saw nothing),—he should not think, should not really think, of trespassing on her hospitality to such an extent. On the point he was firm as a rock. Teddy was of so much more use than he in society that Teddy must go, of course, and Lady Finsbury would kindly excuse him. Of course Lady Finsbury went away mortified, poor soul. Of course she told the story of her defeat with variations, crescendos, and diminuendos, as it suited her, to half-a-dozen intimates ere the week was out; and of course they one and all agreed that the dear creature had been abominably ill-used, and that Lord Overton must have been a perfect brute to say to her face that she had not a room in her house fit for him to sit in.

Meantime Matilda would be groaning in spirit at home. "Oh, Overton, Overton, when will you learn to understand, when will you ever say the right thing? Can't you see, oh, can't you see, you dear blind, blind, blindest of blind beetles, in what a dreadful state of mind you have sent home that poor harmless unoffending old lady? She had done you no injury, she had come brimming over with goodwill and loving-kindness to us all, and instead of accepting graciously her little overtures, and crowning her with joy and gladness, you dashed her hopes to the ground, and seemed to take pleasure in trampling upon them when they were there."

"Good gracious, Matilda, what do you mean? What have I done?"

"Done—done! 'that which can't be undone,' I can tell you, my dear. And after all, why would you not go? You have no reason for refusing. You had not even manners to put forth the ghost of an excuse——"

"——As to excuse, I told her the truth. I was very much obliged, and I understood perfectly,—she thought she could not ask Teddy and you without me, and so she asked me too,—but she did not want me a bit, and as I did not want to go, I thought it was much the best way to take it on myself to refuse. She was quite satisfied. Did you not see she stopped asking me at once——"

"Yes, indeed, I did see that."

"Well, what more would you want?"

"Want? Oh, Overton!"—she stopped to laugh and sigh in despair—"who could believe you could be so—well, never mind, you meant it for the best, but you never, never do yourself justice; and how are people to know that it is all because you are so unfortunately, outrageously, insufferably modest? They won't believe it, nobody will believe it; and besides, you do say such things: now you can see this, surely, that Lady Finsbury could not like your reflecting on her little rooms?"

"I did not 'reflect' on them at all. I merely said we were too many for them; I 'reflected' on *us* if I 'reflected' on any one."

"If you thought we were too many, why should not Teddy have stayed at home, or at least have offered to stay at home, and you and I have gone together? That might have been done."

"To be sure it might,—but to be sure, also, I knew better than that. Why, of course," continued Lord Overton, with a momentary bitterness which showed that although the old wounds of childhood might have been healed, they still woke and smarted at times—"of course, any one would rather have Teddy than me. Don't you suppose I know that? Teddy ornaments the rooms, and keeps everybody going with his talk, while I am good for nothing. Do you think I have forgotten that he was always sent for to the drawing-room as a boy, while it was never thought desirable that *my* studies should be interrupted? Did he not invariably accompany our mother to town when she went to one gay place and another, and was not I left at home? Who taught *me* to play and sing, or gave me masters for dancing, or sent me abroad to learn languages? I am such an oaf that I can't enter a room like other people. I can't speak a tongue but my own. I am not fit for society——"

"You are fit for *any* society. Overton, my dear Overton, don't talk like that," said Matilda, springing forward to put her hand on his arm as he was turning to leave the room. "You deceive yourself—indeed, indeed you do,"—her own eyes reflecting the moisture in his. "Teddy, poor Teddy, you know what he is; surely you do not begrudge him advantages which have just made him passable—just enabled him to go through the world without bringing down its ridicule upon his head; surely you see——," she paused.

"I see, Matilda—I see, I know, I understand ; but I cannot help feeling—oh, you know well enough what I feel."

"And you are so kind to him," pursued she, with a sudden sob ; "yes, you are—you are. No one would be like you to him—the best, the dearest, the——"

"Well, well, never mind ; why, it's all right, of course it's all right ; they meant to do their duty by us both, I suppose ; and one ought not to speak against one's father and mother—specially when they are dead, but——"

"Think what they did for *me*," said Matilda, in a low voice, but with drier eyes.

Her brother was silent.

"Did they not marry me when I was but a girl, a child ?" pursued his sister ; "did they not give me to a man more than twice my age, who neither loved me nor feigned to love me, who was incapable of loving any one but himself ? who made my life a burden——"

"Yet you used to seem happy."

"Was I happy ? It must have been after a strange fashion then. Why, Overton, you say I used to seem happy. To *seem* ? Yes ; that is exactly the word. Was it likely I should do anything but 'seem' ? To show the truth, to lay bare my wretchedness for every passer-by to gaze upon ? No, indeed. The thing was done, and I had but to keep up the farce as best I could. Well, well," continued Matilda in a brisker tone, "well, well, those days are past, and we are all very happy now,—are we not, dear ? As to your being jealous of Teddy——"

"I never said I was jealous. How can you think such a thing ?"

"As to imagining that Teddy can in any way fill your shoes, or take the place of Lord Overton in the sight of a hostess——"

"——Ay, that's it ; I can follow you there. Possibly Lord Overton might be welcome, but I—I—myself——"

"——But you—you—yourself, being as you are, Lord Overton, cannot disassociate your person from your title, your body from—let me see what; at any rate you will not refuse the next invitation, and send home the next fair dame who brings it, dying with chagrin?"

Perhaps she would after such a discussion endeavour still further to explain matters, but the end of any such attempts would be almost always the same—a sort of storm of admiration and vexation on her part, and partial and temporary enlightenment on his.

Such a gleam would soon die out. He would go to the next party as he had been bid, would go internally quaking and outwardly cold and frigid, and although endeavouring to do his best, would somehow contrive to do it with the very worst effect possible. He would not stand on the hearth-rug; he would not play the earl; the most unostentatious back seat would infallibly be his resort, and the nearest person to him—quite possibly the humblest individual there—had such conversation as he possessed. It was not much: he would look wistfully and enviously at his younger brother, who, with artless complacency, and in the very best of spirits, was prattling away first to one and then to another; who was moving about from place to place as anything caught his eye or engaged his attention; who, during the dinner which followed, would be beset on every side by fair ones anxious for his attention, for attention which he seemed willing and able to distribute to each and all impartially,—and he would wonder how Teddy did it. No such brilliant effusions came from him, no such happy sallies set the table laughing. It was hard on his companion, Lord Overton would consider; and graver and graver would grow his voice, and longer and longer his face, as the hours wore on. When all was over he would heave a sigh of relief, but even the relief was tempered by apprehension of a probable lecture on the way home; and thus it was scarcely

to be wondered at that society liked the unfortunate nobleman little better than he liked society, and that although some—the charitable—merely called him stiff and stately, the greater part of his acquaintance characterised him as eaten up with pride.

And what of Matilda, the widow, the mother, and now the grandmother?

She was, as has been already said, a lovely woman; full of animal life; warm-blooded, high spirited, and impetuous; a passionate partisan or an unsparing adversary; one who loved or hated with equal warmth; generous to a fault, or sarcastic to acrimony. At the age of thirty-seven—for she was three years younger than Overton—she still possessed in a redundant share the freshness, energy, and spring of youth—perhaps also some of its incompleteness. There was still promise to be fulfilled, still material for experience to work upon; but this only added, as it seemed, to the charms of one already so charming—one who was too charming to be perfect. Her voice was soft, yet rich; never raised above an even medium note; yet so clear was the enunciation, and so resonant the tone, that wherever the sound of it was carried, words and meaning could be discerned also.

In figure she was tall, and though not more fully formed than became her age, yet giving indications that, in after life, she might become stout rather than thin.

But who shall describe the lustre of her large dark eye, by turns soft, subtle, searching, or sparkling, brimming, and mischievous? Who could forget the exquisite pose of her head, the broad low brow, the play of her lips, the curve of her chin, the rounded throat, the falling shoulder? No wonder that she was adored. No wonder that every man who had once seen, looked twice, thrice, whenever and wherever he could, at Lady Matilda.

How it came to pass that, with lovers in plenty, she had never contracted a second union, even Matilda herself

would hardly have been able to explain. She neither was, nor had ever affected to be, a broken-hearted woman, one who had played out her part in a troublesome world, and had fain have no more ado with it: so far indeed from this being the case, people did say that, having been married off as fast as possible by parents who were solely anxious to get the skittish lass off their hands, the poor thing had been mercifully deprived of a husband whom no one could tolerate, and that probably the happiest day of her life had been that which saw her, all beclouded from head to foot in trappings of woe, brought back a widow to the home of her childhood. Over that home the kind Overton now reigned, and over him Matilda herself meant to reign. She meant it, and she did it. Never had sister found a warmer welcome, and never had one been more needed or appreciated. She had flown at her brothers' necks, kissed, hugged, wept over them with—we hardly like to confess what kind of tears, but perhaps the two may have guessed,—at any rate, in their satisfaction, and in her own, each felt that, with Matilda back again, a new life had begun. Every want was supplied, every void filled up. Soon there began to be heard a firm light tread up and down the broad staircase; a cheerful woman's voice would issue forth through open doorways; and by-and-by a jest and a laugh would peep slyly out when Matilda's lips were open, as though half afraid to make known their presence, and yet unable to hide away longer. Sounds of music echoed from distant chambers; flowers, dewy and fragrant, met the eye about the rooms; there were parcels on the hall-table; there was a riding-whip here, and a pair of gloves there; and a neat little coat would be found hung up among the men's coats on the stand, and a sweet little hat would perch alongside the brothers' hats upon the pegs; and all this meant—Matilda.

Fresh wheel-marks down the avenue showed that Matilda was out driving; the boat-house key lost, told



that she had been out boating ; the hothouse doors left ajar, betrayed that she had been eating the grapes.

Everywhere was Matilda felt, and to everything she had a right ; and thus intrenched in comfort, authority, and contentment, sure it would have been a bold adventurer indeed who would have thought of storming such a citadel.

### CHAPTER III.

#### L. OTTA.

*"She speaks, behaves, and acts, just as she ought —  
But never, never, reached one generous thought."*

—POPE.

We must not, however, forget that up to within a very few months of the time our story opens, there had been another inmate of Overton Hall, and indeed an inmate who had no mean idea of her own importance. This was the little girl called Lotta, who, with large round eyes and demure step, accompanied her mother on Lady Matilda's return to the Hall. Now it must be confessed that the one very very slight thorn in the sides of the three chiefly concerned in this restoration was connected with the little Charlotte—or Lotta : they could not, any of them, be quite as fond of Matilda's child as they could have wished to be. It would have been natural for her to have been the centre of attraction to one and all—for the bereaved parent to have been absolutely devoted to her darling, and for the uncles to have found an unfailing source of interest and amusement in one who was at the endearing age of six, when childhood is especially bewitching, and when the second teeth have not yet begun

to come. The whole household might have been provided with an object in Lotta. In taking care of her, watching over her, delighting her little heart with trifles, admiring the dawning of her intelligence, and recounting her sayings, an unflagging source of conversation and study might have been discovered: and, indeed, wiseacres shook their heads, and predicted that a nicely spoilt young lady Miss Charlotte Wilmot would grow up to be, in such an atmosphere, and with such surroundings.

They were mistaken. Lotta was not spoilt after the fashion they thought of,—and this from no severe exercise of self-restraint on the part of Lady Matilda and her brothers, but simply because they were not so tempted. Nothing, indeed, made the widow more indignant than a hint that such was the case; hard and long she strove against the fact, against nature, against everything that favoured the distressing conviction, but she was overpowered at last, and almost allowed it to herself in her disappointment. She could not, try as she might, turn Charlotte into an engaging child: she petted her, played with her, romped with her; and Charlotte accepted it all without hesitation, but without originating either a caress or a frolic in return. What was wrong? No one seemed to know. From infancy the little girl had been a compound of virtues, and it was said of her that a less troublesome charge no nurse had ever possessed. At the age of eight she cut and stitched dolls' frocks without assistance, set herself her own tasks if her governess were unwell or absent, gave directions as to when tucks were to be let down or breadths let out in her frocks, and refrained—on principle—from tasting unknown puddings at table. What was there left for mother, or uncles, to do?

"She puts me to shame, I know," cried Lady Matilda, valiantly; "she thinks of things in a way I never could, and quite wonderful in a child of her age. I don't know

where I should be without Lotta, I am so forgetful about what has to be done, and she reminds me of it just at the right time and in the right place. Do you know, she always asks nurse for her medicine"—Lotta being at the time ill with measles. "Nurse says there is no need for *her* to think about it, for as sure as the finger of the clock points to the hour, Lotta asks for her dose. Is it not nice, and—thoughtful of the poor child?" And as she spoke thus bravely, almost fiercely, in defence of her offspring, no one would venture to differ from a word she said; indeed they would hastily and nervously agree, find more to say, discriminate between the little phenomenon and others, valorously finding a verdict in Lotta's favour, and watch the very tips of every syllable they uttered, lest anything should escape to rouse suspicion on the part of the parent, thus herself upon the watch against herself.

But how came Lotta to be a child of Lady Matilda—of the gay, careless, jocund Matilda? How came such a creature of habit and order to be associated with such a very spirit of heedlessness and improvidence? How grew such a methodical imp in such a casual soil? How, in short, came the dull, worthy, excellent, and most unattractive daughter, to be born of the brilliant, arch, incorrigible mother? A mystery of mysteries it was.

Lady Matilda did not like to have remarks made upon the subject. She was fond of Charlotte, maternally,—that is to say, Charlotte was her child, her only child, the little one whom she had watched from infancy, and who was to be her friend and companion in after life. She had rejoiced in being young for Charlotte's sake. Charlotte should have no sober-minded, middle-aged, far-away parent, who would smile benignantly on her games and toys, or listen condescendingly to her tales of lovers and suitors, having neither part nor lot in such matters, and looking down in wisdom from a height above them. Such mothers were all very well; but she would be on a level

with her child, hand and glove in all that went on, the maiden's chosen companion and intimate.

And then, behold, Lotta had needed no such companion; had felt herself sufficient for herself from earliest days; had, if the truth were told, an idea as she waxed older, that she was her mother's superior in sense and sagacity, forethought and prudence. What was to be done, this being the case? A wet day would come, and Lady Matilda, bored to death with a long afternoon in the house, would cheerfully propose—making Lotta the pretext—a game of battledore and shuttlecock in the gallery. Oh yes, Lotta would play if mamma wished it; but it would surely tire mamma, and for herself she would prefer going on with what she was doing. She was quite happy; she was preparing her lessons for the next day; she did not need any play, thank you. After such a snub, Matilda and Teddy would look at the child—Matilda with a perplexed curious look, Teddy with a grin—and then they would go off and play with each other, while not even the sounds of mirth and the regular monotonous tap-tap of the shuttlecock would bring the diligent and virtuous piece of industry from her self-set task.

“She might have been born an old woman,” Matilda would mutter to herself; but she would take very good care not to let what had passed elicit a comment from Teddy. While Lotta was very young, and before it became absolutely certain what Lotta would turn out, he knew that no animadversions on his niece would be permitted, and that his sister, sore because of her own disappointment, would not stand so much as an insinuation from others. It was when the little girl was most imposing and didactic, was least endurable, in other terms, that Lady Matilda's tongue ran fastest in her favour. What would her uncles have? They need not expect every child to be like other children, as if they were a

pack of sheep. Lotta was all that any one could desire in the way of goodness and gentleness: and as for her little practical head, you might trust her with a whole list of articles to buy, and shops to go to, and she would not only forget nothing, but would bring her little account afterwards and make it balance to a farthing. "Which is more than I ever could do," the poor lady would add in conclusion.

But as Charlotte grew up there was less and less in common between her and her mother.

The latter could not hide from herself, as years went on, how limited in reality were her daughter's powers, and how commonplace her mind. The very governess learned to shrug her shoulders. "Yes, Miss Charlotte was not what you could call *bright*, not *quick*. She was a very good girl, very industrious, very diligent, but she had not the—the ability. No; she had no decided turn for anything. For languages, certainly not; for history, geography, grammar, pretty well; but music, drawing, poetry"—she would shake her head.

In short, Charlotte was a dullard, who never opened a book if she could help it, who neither knew nor cared to know what was in the heavens above or in the earth beneath, who seldom put a question, who never created an idea, and who was far more satisfied with her ignorance than the wisest philosopher with his knowledge. At seventeen Lady Matilda, who had indeed, as we know, no cause to advocate matrimony, was still fain to acknowledge to herself that when the young lady had finished with lessons, there would be nothing for it but to marry her.

"Provided she gets a poor man she may do very well," reflected the unworldly mother; "a rich one would leave her far too little to think about; and as she has something of her own, she can never be really at a loss. Grant her a poor man—a moderately poor man—and she will find the

most delightful occupation in economising, saving, looking after every bit and scrap, worrying her servants, and reducing everything she has on hand to system. She will do her own marketing, and turn her own gowns. She will have a bunch of keys as big as a bottle. Yes, yes; that must be it. Lotta must marry, and marry soon, or—well, there is no use denying it, she will drive us all out of our senses.”

“Since Miss Grove has deserted us”—for the wily Miss Grove, oppressed by the staid solemnity of her one pupil, had flown to a livelier schoolroom, after having first assured Lady Matilda, with a mixture of artfulness and ingenuity, that it was of no use her staying on, as Miss Wilmot would never learn more than she knew already—“since Lotta has been her own mistress, she has become quite dreadful,” owned poor Matilda to herself. “She prosed to Overton like a woman of fifty, and seems to think that her mission in life is to keep us all in order. I am sure I really do not know what will be the end of it, if some charitable person does not take pity upon us, and appear to the rescue.”

And then, as if by magic, who should appear before the astonished eyes of the fair conjuror but the very charitable person she sought, as though raised by her spells? It was too much. She was almost overpowered by her good luck. Could it be—could it really be? Was it possible, not to say actually the case, that here was Mr Robert Hanwell, the unexceptionable, not too rich, not too clever, not too exacting son and heir of old John Hanwell at the other end of the county, coming forward as a suitor for the hand of the youthful and charming and sadly perplexing Miss Wilmot?

Miss Wilmot’s mamma clapped her hands when there was no one by to see her.

Then she was vexed with herself, and the tears came into her eyes as she saw what she had done. Was that

the way to treat an event so serious? Was that the spirit wherein she should have received the news that her daughter's happiness was, humanly speaking, secured for life? She ought to have known better. Well did she know whence came this good thing, and who had taken thought of the widow and the fatherless, and a softer light shone in her eye, and the lip quivered a little, as associations and memory awoke, as they do awake at such times. Lotta would be happy in her husband, it appeared. Mr Hanwell was known to them all by repute, and repute spoke him a good man, come of a good stock. He was apparently much enamoured of Lotta; he had met her at a country house, whither Charlotte had been packed off in order to give the household at Overton a moment's breathing-space after her emancipation, and the sedate, well-conducted, and fairly comely young miss had apparently found favour in the eyes of one person from the very beginning of their acquaintance. Lotta had been glad enough to go, glad to leave Overton, where, although she knew not why, she herself had felt uncomfortable, and where, just before, Teddy had succeeded in rousing up the party, if he had not improved matters, by sulking for a week on end. Lotta had gone off in good spirits, well pleased and well dressed—Lady Matilda had taken care of the last—and the consequence was, she had been caught at her best. They had little expected such a result; they had merely felt that Mademoiselle must betake herself elsewhere for a season, must give them a brief release from her sense and supervision; therefore the delight of all may be imagined, and even Lady Matilda's childish expression of it pardoned, when one fine morning who should appear but Mr Robert Hanwell, big with purposes concerning her.

He met with no opposition; to demur was not to be thought of. The earl and his sister had indeed much ado to conceal their indecent glee at the prospect of getting

rid in a manner at once so unexpected and so delightful of an incubus whose weight had already begun to press heavily on their shoulders; and it was only by rigidly composing their countenances that they could restrain an outbreak and overflow of smiles, and by steadfastly fixing their eyes upon the ground that they could keep them from reciprocally congratulating each other.

With some trepidation Mr Hanwell made his offer. He was, he stated, not a wealthy man, but his father could do something for him; he was the eldest son, and the estate was unencumbered; his father could give him seven or eight hundred a-year; he had no profession, having—hum—haw—dabbled in law a little, but not been exactly called to the bar—at least—well, it did not signify, it would not have suited him,—and all he meant was that, having thus no tie to any place—no necessity for being here or there—he would be able to settle down anywhere; he should have no objection—indeed, would be very glad—to be in the neighbourhood of Overton, as no doubt Lady Matilda would wish,”—Lady Matilda gravely bent her head,—“he would do anything, in short, in that way, or in any way, for he felt very much what a—that—a—that he was asking a great deal, that he was seeking to deprive a mother of her only child,”—Lady Matilda bowed again,—“but indeed,” concluded the aspirant with a flourish—“indeed, I would endeavour to do my best to be worthy of the position I aspire to.” The last sentence with a glance towards Lord Overton, who was standing harmlessly by, and who had no idea whatever that the said position referred in any way to him.

Mr Hanwell thus got through the whole of the speech he had previously prepared, without interruption from either, and probably also without in the least discovering then or thereafter that there had been no occasion for saying anything half so fine.



Overton merely observed that Charlotte was a good girl, and would make him a good wife.

Lady Matilda endeavoured to go a step further, and floundered about between truth and falsehood for several minutes, before she was able to seek refuge in complimenting alternately the young man's parents and himself. "She knew," she vowed, "all about the Hanwells, everybody must know *about* the Hanwells if they did no more, and she should be only too happy to be connected with them, to have her daughter enter so—so—" for the life of her she could not think of any other word than "respectable," and as that would hardly have done to say, she was fain to do without an attribute, and finish off rather humbly with "such a family as the Hanwells."

It was at this juncture that the door flew open, and Teddy,—who had not been present, but who had managed nevertheless to learn, as he usually did, by means best known to himself, all that was going on,—Teddy now burst in with a face like a sunbeam, shook the visitor's hand for full two minutes, stared him in the face, and wound up with a laugh which we are bound to confess was suspiciously silly.

All, however, was taken in good part.

Mr Hanwell was satisfied, more than satisfied, with his reception; and Lady Matilda devoted herself for the remainder of his stay towards keeping up the degree of complacency which had been already excited. In private, as we know, she clapped her hands. Lotta married and provided for, settled in a comfortable home, with a good kind husband of her own choosing, within easy reach of Overton, yet not *too* near—not so near as to necessitate daily intercourse—oh, with her whole heart of hearts she blessed Robert Hanwell.

The wedding took place, and we know what the next event was.

## CHAPTER IV.

"IT IS NOT HER BEING YOUNG."

"Amoret, my lovely foe,  
Tell me where thy strength doth lie,  
Where the power that charms us so,  
In thy soul, or in thine eye?"

—WALLER.

All this was very delightful, but it must be confessed that entirely content as Lady Matilda was with her son-in-law *as* her son-in-law, in no other light could she have endured him.

He made Charlotte happy. Very well. That was all he had engaged to do, and in thus fulfilling his part of the marriage-contract he was an undeniable success. As a husband he was a pattern, a model, faultless and flawless; as a creditable connection, even as an eligible match, he might very well pose for want of a better; as a neighbour, he did tolerably; but as a man, weighed in the balances, there was no concealing that he was very light weight indeed. The first blush of acquaintanceship had barely worn off,—he had hardly begun to be at home in the circle, and to assume a right to the seat by Lotta in the drawing-room and at the dinner-table,—ere it was seen and felt that he was eminently fit for her companionship, and pre-eminently unfit for that of any other member of the family.

He was not amusing, and he could not be amused. He was dull, and he liked being dull. Few things interested him, and nothing entertained him. In short, Lotta had fallen on her feet by thus obtaining her own counterpart in a consequential prig, who thought very little and talked a great deal, whose ideas seldom passed beyond the very narrow range of matters connected with himself or

those belonging to him, who was never at a loss for material wherewith to enhance his own consequence, and who could not even, according to Lady Matilda, say "Good-bye" or "How d'ye do?" like other people.

The thing that was correct and proper to be done Robert would do; and yet how delightful it would often have been could he have been dissuaded from doing it. One may be very much in the right, and yet it would be better to be in the wrong.

For instance, Lady Matilda hated ceremony, and ceremony was the very marrow of Robert's bones, the very breath of his nostrils; and what was the upshot? We will not say that she grew to hate the formal young man because of his formality; but it is certain that sometimes when she associated the two in her own mind, it was not clear to her which she for the time least affected. Robert meant well certainly; and she was ready, upon reflection, to allow that it was his place to treat her with a certain amount of deference, but still——. She could not rattle over in the dogcart to Endhill, but she must accept his arm out to her "carriage" when she left, or, worse still, endure his escort for all the long four miles home, did she choose to return on foot. Nothing that she could do or say would deter him from a proceeding often really inconvenient to himself and infinitely distasteful to her, since he had made up his mind that he understood the etiquette on such points, and that even in the teeth of Lady Matilda's threats and entreaties, he would not fail in his duty. In vain she predicted rain, wind, snow, anything and everything that the elements could do, to save herself the infliction—she would have to give in and be taken home in state at last. She could not run in to see Lotta for five minutes, meaning no stiff call, but merely to fly out again as soon as her errand or inquiry was made,—she could not do this, but the long-necked, long-backed figure of Lotta's husband would stalk forth from

somewhere about, and be all readiness to proceed by her side presently. Her direction was his; her time, his. She could not struggle with any success against attentions so becoming and suitable, and there was not even a window through which she could escape unseen.

Sometimes she had an unexpected ally, when Lotta would put in a fond remonstrance. "Dear Robert, you do not need; I am sure mamma would not wish it when you have a cold already." But the look given in return was meant to convince the speaker that dear Robert knew better what dear Robert should do than all the mammas in Christendom. He had not intruded into the drawing-room; he could quite understand that he might not be wanted there, that mother and daughter might occasionally prefer to meet without the presence of the proverbially unwelcome third, but the rest must be left to him; and this was one way in which the new member of the family could show himself both dull and dogged.

Again, when the young couple had to be invited over to the Hall, as was pretty often felt to be necessary—it was not precisely a pleasure, though no one said aloud as much—surely Robert might very well have declined for both when obliged to excuse one. *He* wrote the answer—he might have done it easily, had he seen fit. No offence would have been taken had he, in the roundest terms, asserted his inclination for his own fireside and his dear Charlotte's company, when Charlotte herself was unable to take the long drive and sit out the long dinner—and so he was assured. The truth was, that on the first occasion of a note being sent over when the young wife was known to be ailing, it had been comfortably predicted by Matilda that no acceptance need be apprehended from Robert, since he, who was so very particular on all such matters, would, were Charlotte to decline, infallibly think it only decorous to remain behind also.

Unfortunately Robert's decorum took another turn.

He allowed that it was a pity that it should so have happened, and Lotta was extremely sorry to have to give up so pleasant a prospect, but for himself, he should be most happy to come; he would not have gone anywhere else *en garçon*, but going to Overton was quite another thing; and Lotta begged him to say from her, that she would have been quite vexed had he refused her people on her account. A friend had been invited to keep her company at home, and he had no doubt she would do very well, and be quite able for one evening to amuse herself.

"And three sides of a sheet about it!" cried the ungrateful Matilda, at the close. She could have better liked a worse man, and that was the honest truth about Robert.

Nor was Mr Hanwell in his way more enamoured of his mother-in-law, on nearer acquaintance, than Lady Matilda was with him.

In some inexplicable fashion he was aggrieved by her beauty and intelligence, her ready wit and roguish eye; she was too happy, too merry, too—too—he could not exactly say what,—but there was a something incongruous between the lady and her position, which, in the sight of a young man who, with every fibre of his body and soul worshipped the god of propriety, was hardly to be borne with temper. Naturally he could not think of Matilda as Matilda. She was the late Mr Wilmot's widow, Lotta's mother, and his own mother-in-law,—and it must be said for him, that such a mother-in-law was undoubtedly rather a queer sort of appendage to any man, let alone that Robert was himself thirty-three years of age, and quite willing to own to it; that he had settled down into matrimony with a hearty goodwill; that he filled his waistcoat, changed his socks whenever the roads were wet, preferred a dogcart to a saddle, and dinners to dances.

On his marriage he had voluntarily surrendered what-

ever of youth he might once have possessed; he no longer cared to be called or thought of as a young man; and pray what did Lady Matilda mean by looking years his junior, and disdaining his hand over the fences?

Lotta had not half so springy a step as her mother. It was childish to be always joking, as Lady Matilda was. And precious little advice or help had Lotta's parent to give when it came to talking about sensible things, he could testify to that. On first taking up house, of course he had expected that Lady Matilda's opinion would have been all in all with her daughter, and that she would have been Lotta's stand-by amidst the inevitable difficulties and troubles of settling in; but he had soon found his mistake. Every mortal thing had Lotta arranged for herself; all the furniture she had chosen; she had hired her own servants and engaged her own tradespeople,—while Lady Matilda had only looked in to listen, and wonder, and smile. He liked Lady Matilda—at least he thought he did; but he wished, oh how he wished, that she stood in any other relation to himself than the one in which she did.

She was to him a provocation extraordinary. Almost every time the two came in contact, she, to use her own expression, fell foul of him, and that meant that he longed to speak for once openly, and conjure her to take more heed to herself, to take more care of what she said and did, to be more dignified, more reticent, more Lotta-like. Having been much of an authority under his paternal roof, and having laid down the law to half-a-dozen submissive sisters at a time, Robert could ill brook the thralldom now imposed by circumstances on his tongue, or refrain from lecturing the young madam when she did amiss.

Lotta, his dear discreet Lotta, never, or at least hardly ever, needed an admonishing word; but to have straitly rebuked Lotta's mother, had Lady Matilda been any one

else, would have been a delight for which his very soul thirsted.

And the wilful creature saw this, and took pains to make his burden heavier than he could bear. With the keenest relish she marked the remonstrance that was struggling to escape lips which resolutely forced it back; with twinkling eye she kept watch upon the uneasy frown, the restive twitch, the just uttered and hastily recalled syllable,—and then with the sweetest, naughtiest audacity that was ever seen, she would add such a touch as would send Robert to the right-about in a trice, fleeing from a temptation which might have proved too much for him.

He never did transgress. That is to say, he never had transgressed up to the time our story opens; but whether after events did not overpower even his resolution remains to be seen.

As it was, he only found the situation very, abominably awkward.

"It's not her being young and that," he would aver. "It's not her being only thirty-seven, by any means. Thirty-seven is a very good age, a very good age indeed,—if Lady Matilda would only think so, and would only show that she thinks so. Thirty-seven; bless me! Thirty-seven. Why there are plenty of ladies are quite *passée* by thirty or thirty-five; and the married ones—and *she's* a married one, mind you—well, you don't think of them as young ladies, not as *young* ladies at all. They are getting on, at any rate; they are full-grown women; they think sensibly, and talk sensibly, about their children, and servants, and domestic affairs—these are the things that ought to interest women of Lady Matilda's time of life. There's Charlotte now, Charlotte not nineteen yet,—'pon my word, if you saw her and her mother together,—at least I mean"—rather hastily, "if you *heard* them together, you would take Charlotte for the older of the two. You

would indeed. Thirty-seven! I declare when I am thirty-seven I shan't want to be running the risk of breaking my neck over all the worst fences in the county, or twirling about by moonlight on the ice, as Lady Matilda did last winter. Poor Charlotte never got her skates on, but there was her mother out every evening, and she and Teddy had all the people round let into the park, and such goings on. Anybody might go that liked,—it was not at all the thing to do. And that was Lady Matilda to the life. She neither knows nor cares what's expected of her; she just does as she pleases, and listens to nobody. You never catch her of an afternoon sitting properly in her drawing-room, or driving in her carriage; she is either singing like mad out in the hall, or larking about all over the place with Teddy. I wish, upon my word, I wish any one could make her listen to reason,—but that, no one ever does. She has no more notion of what is befitting her position and dignity than a chambermaid. She makes fun of Lotta—I tell you she does. She would make fun of me too if she dared, but I can take care of myself. We shan't quarrel, but I have no idea of letting myself be looked down upon by any one. Well," after a pause, "well, there's one comfort. Lady Matilda can't have the face to sport youth any longer once she's a grandmother."

The above reflection added yet one more drop to the fulness of his cup of complacency when Lotta's boy was born, and when, on the same afternoon, he stood dangling his watch and seals on the cottage doorstep awaiting the expected visitors from the Hall.

He had half hoped that Overton might come himself; but Overton, as usual, quite unconscious that anything of the sort was expected of him, had walked off in another direction, and had not even sent so much as a message. There were the other two, however, large as life; Lady Matilda gaily waving her hand as they cantered up the



drive—Teddy, with less alacrity, shaking his riding-whip.

There they were, calling out greetings and congratulations ere they reached the doorstep.

"So glad—so pleased—welcome news," began the young grandmother—

"Hush—hush—hush," cried Robert, hastily.

"What's the matter? Nothing wrong?" The speaker's note changed on the instant. "Nothing wrong, Robert?"

"Nothing in the least wrong. Oh dear no, far from it,—but we must be careful all the same. The sound of your voice——" looking up at the windows.

"Why, Lotta's room is round the corner; she can't possibly hear," said Lady Matilda, rather shortly. "You gave me a fright with your 'hush—hush—hush.' I was merely going to wish you joy."

"Many thanks. Allow me," Mr Hanwell cut short the discussion by assisting her to alight, resenting in his heart the very light touch of her fingers as she did so, but nevertheless preceding with every courtesy his visitors to the drawing-room. "William, take the horses round, and go the back way—not under your mistress's window. Will you come in, too?" to Teddy, who was ruefully following. "I don't know if you can see baby, but I will inquire."

"Oh, I say, don't."

"Being in the dressing-room, it may not be convenient."

"Of course not. I'll go in here."

"And wait? Yes, if you kindly will." Robert nodded approbation. "Lady Matilda can go up-stairs at once—at least, I think she can. I fancy this is not a debarred hour—but though the nurse informed me all about the hours herself, I foolishly forgot to notice if it was from two to four, or from two to half-past four."

"If what was?"

"The afternoon sleep; if the rooms were to be closed for the afternoon sleep, you know. Of course *you* know all about such arrangements," Robert had a touch of malicious pleasure in the remark, for it was one of his favourite grievances that Lady Matilda never did seem to know about such things—never appeared in any way to have assimilated with matrimony and motherhood. "The afternoon sleep was to be for two hours or two hours and a half, and during that time no visitors were to be admitted, and of course I undertook that the rule should be carried out," he continued, as they ascended the staircase. "Now, this way please" (as though she had never been in the house before), "this way, and take care of the two steps down. This is the door, Lady Matilda." (Lady Matilda took him off to the life afterwards.) "This curtain is my contrivance, and I think you will approve it. The draught got in under the door, and the nurse—her name is Mrs Burrble—she complained of it, so I set my wits to work. Now then, allow me," (of all his phrases, she disliked that "allow me" most)—"allow me, I can let you pass under perfectly." Tap, tap, at the door. "Nurse," said Robert, in his most portentous whisper, "Mrs Burrble. May we come in?"

Lady Matilda laughed outright. She ought not to have done it. She might have been caught in the act either by the nurse or the gentleman, or both, and it would have been no excuse in their eyes that she really could not help herself. She ought to have helped herself, and it was only by the skin of her teeth that she escaped, since there was scarcely a moment between the tap at the door and the appearance of the portly nurse curtseying behind it. But fate was kind, and Mrs Nurse was intent upon herself. It was not for some seconds that she looked at her lady visitor, and then—but we must tell what she had been doing. She had heard voices and steps outside the door, and divining as by instinct who the new-comer was, had utilised the

pause which Mr Hanwell made to explain his contrivance of the curtain, to whisk around the infant the shawl which grandmamma had sent. She now lifted her eyes as she displayed her charge with all the satisfaction of having been so sharp. She lifted her eyes and beheld grandmamma herself.

Grandmamma it was and must be. There was no mistaking the distinct enunciation, "Lady Matilda has come to see the baby, nurse," but—grandmamma !

Mrs Burrble had heard indeed rumours of Lady Matilda's youth and beauty, and she had figured to herself a comely dame, fresh-coloured and well busked, rustling in with a train sweeping the carpet yards behind her ; one who would fall into raptures over the darling boy, finding likenesses all round in every feature, and who would forthwith enter into close and confidential alliance with herself. She had meant to be very close and confidential with my lady, and to take even hints and advice in good part, if need be, since her ladyship would be sure to be good for a gold or silver bowl at the christening, and as likely as not, if she played her cards well, for a handsome silk gown for nurse herself.

A grandmamma was always a grandmamma, and though grandmammias in the house, "passing in and out and making no end of a work," Mrs Burrble did not "hold with," a grandmamma four miles off, who would be content like a sensible lady to stop away till she was sent for, and would then come at just the right and proper hour (by sheer good hap Lady Matilda had hit upon it)—such a grandmamma was "a paragraine" ; and inspired by the above reflection, the worthy dame dropped her most respectful curtesy as the door opened, and raised her modest and expectant eyes to behold—Lady Matilda.

It was well she was accustomed to babies,—she nearly dropped the one she held in her amazement. It was well she was not spoken to, for she could not have answered.

So mute was her bewildered stare, so nervous, so puzzled, so uncertain and confounded and unlike itself her manner, that Robert, who interpreted look, pause, and expression exactly aright, was annoyed and put out of countenance. He felt afresh that justice had not been done him in the matter of his mother-in-law, when here was this woman even, a stranger, a dependant, so aghast at the apparition before her as to be unable to conceal her feelings.

In the dusky light of the October afternoon, Lady Matilda's lithe figure, graceful in every motion, scarce showed that it was a trifle more full and rounded than it had been a dozen years before, her cheeks were bright with exercise and excitement, and her sparkling eyes, her quick step forward, her eager "Where is he?" all so unlike what should have been, what ought to have been,—gracious heavens, it was too much for any man's patience! Oh, why had he not been blessed with a connection more to the purpose? What had that radiant form, whose very presence seemed to bring in a glow of life, a breath of the fresh outer air into the little dark room, what had she to do with shaded windows, and silence, and—and baby-clothes?

Solemn and deferential as was the deportment of Lady Matilda's son-in-law at all times, it exceeded on this occasion what it had ever been before, since in the face of every adverse circumstance, rising above the perplexity and incongruity of his position and hers, Robert resolved to show that whatever might be Matilda's shortcomings, however young and gay and inconsequent she might show herself, he, at least, knew his place. "My dear Teddy, he nearly killed me," averred Teddy's sister afterwards. "I suppose he saw the joke; and the more he saw it, the less he liked it. The poor nurse, I pitied her: she must have had a severe time of it, rather. There were we two,—Robert hopping about all over the cradle to get out of my way——"

——“All over the cradle! How you do talk!”

“And I not knowing on which arm to take the baby!”

“Well, you ought to have known, I suppose.”

“I suppose I ought, but the fact remains that I did not, or, at any rate, that I had forgotten; and so what did I do but commit the heinous offence of taking it on the wrong arm! You should have seen Mrs Gamp's face.”

“Mrs Gamp?” said Teddy, bewildered.

“To be sure, yes. Her name is Burrble. How stupid of me to say Gamp! Teddy, see you remember that her name is Burrble, and never, never call her anything else. Mind that, Teddy. People are very particular about their names,” said Matilda, anxiously. “And then I expect you will be godfather,” she ran on, glibly changing the current of Teddy's thoughts. “I am sure Robert will ask you.”

“No, that he won't.”

“Oh yes, he will; I am nearly sure he will. I am sure——”

“You may be as sure as you like, but you are wrong all the same. As to that baby, I didn't want it, I know; it's the greatest rot being a grand-uncle; but if it was to come, of course I ought to have been asked to be its godfather.”

“And of course you will.”

“Very well, you know best, of course; only I happen to have heard,” said Teddy, doggedly——“I happen to have heard the opposite. If you would only listen to me, I could tell you not only who are to be asked, but who *have been* asked; for I saw the letters lying on the slab, waiting for the post.”

“You don't say so, Teddy. Well?”

“And, to make sure, I asked Robert.”

“Oh, you did?—oh. You didn't ask Robert as if you

had been looking, Teddy dear?" said Lady Matilda, rather dubiously.

"Not a bit of it. I merely pointed to the letters with my whip, as if they had just caught my eye. I had been looking at them all the time he was up-stairs with you. However, he was not to know that; so I poked them carelessly as we passed by, and said, 'Godfathers, eh, Robert?' in the easiest manner possible. So then he told me at once that he had written to them this morning."

"Bless the man! no grass grows under his feet. Well, Teddy," louder, "well, and who are they?"

"A Mr Whewell, and a Mr Challoner."

"A Mr Whewell, and a Mr Challoner. And who are they? What are they? Did you not hear anything about them?"

"Oh, I heard a lot, but I didn't listen."

"Stupid fellow. Why, I want to know. Why, Ted, my dear boy, how unutterably tiresome you can be when you try! Mr Whewell, and Mr Challoner. Depend upon it, Mr Whewell is—stop, I know. He is that very clever, amusing young barrister who came down in the summer. You remember? We all wondered how Robert ever contrived to pick up such a friend. I am glad it is Mr Whewell. If Mr Whewell should come down to Endhill, we must see him again; he must come and shoot at Overton and chirp us up a bit. Those Appleby girls will be glad to come and make up the party at dinner: we owe them something, and this will do exactly. Well, and Mr Challoner? Challoner"—musing—"Challoner; that name I never heard before. Challoner! I rather like it. Teddy, can't you tell me something, anything, about this Mr Challoner?"

"No," said Teddy, calmly, "I can't."

"Not if he is old or young, rich or poor, black or white?"

"I don't know."

"Is he a school friend, or a college friend, or a relation friend?"

"I don't know."

"Is he—has he ever been here before?"

"I don't know."

"Is he——"

"Now, look here," said Teddy, suddenly, "just you stop that. I don't mind your talking as much as you please—as much as Robert does, if you like,—but I won't have questions. It's no use questioning *me*; I ain't going to stand it. I have told you already that I don't know; and when I have once said 'I don't know,' nothing you can say will make me know."

## CHAPTER V.

MATILDA LONGS TO TASTE THE DOUBTFUL CUP AGAIN.

"I live and lack; I lack and have;

I have; and miss the thing I crave."

—GASCOIGNE.

Robert Hanwell, like other people, sometimes hit the mark without knowing it.

In the two notes which he despatched inviting his two friends severally to stand sponsors for the newborn son and heir, and for that purpose to come down shortly to Endhill for the christening, he held out an inducement which neither of them could resist. It cannot be said that either of the gentlemen thus appealed to was devoted to Robert: he and his concerns were as little known as they were of little interest to them: his marriage had cost them each a present, and it appeared that the birth of his son was likely to do the same,—and that was about

all,—or, at least, would have been all, had not to each invitation a clause been appended—a mere postscript, an after-thought it was—which made the announcement infinitely more interesting, and the summons more seductive. “The pheasant-shooting at Overton is remarkably good,” wrote Robert, “and I have no doubt Lord Overton would be happy to give you a few days in the covers.” He had folded up Challoner’s note before even recollecting to say this, and indeed it was perhaps more the satisfaction of being able to answer for Lord Overton’s obligingness than anything else which induced him to pause, unfold the sheet, add the P.S., and then say the same thing to Whewell. In the matter of shooting, Lord Overton was good nature itself, and could be counted on to grant a request for a day at any time; indeed, as it was so easily obtained, and as nobody either at Overton or Endhill cared much about it, Mr Hanwell threw in the brief suggestion, as we have seen, in the background of his letter, little imagining the effect it would produce in changing the aspect of the whole affair in the eyes of his friends.

Both, as it happened, were good shots, and neither was possessed of good shooting.

In consequence, they rose like greedy fish to the bait, and swallowed whole the tempting morsel,—indeed, while gladly agreeing “to be present on the interesting occasion,” Robert might almost have seen in their eager assent a devout wish that it could have been held earlier. Challoner indeed went so far as to feel every time he looked at the sky, the soft grey cloudy October sky, that he was being defrauded of that day in the Overton woods; while Whewell, boxed up in dreary law courts and dismal chambers, solaced himself by getting through all the work he possibly could beforehand, in order to leave himself free, should the few days specified by his friend extend themselves to the length of a week. A week he might be able to spare, when pheasants were in the question.



And as to the chance of his being invited on, he had not very much anxiety on that head, since there were not many things he could not compass if he had a mind to do so; neither were there many people he could not get round. As for Robert Hanwell? Robert Hanwell would most certainly do as he was bid.

Two "very happys" accordingly were received at End-hill, two silver mugs were promised, and two gentlemen would be forthcoming when wanted.

"I told you they would be pleased," said Robert, as he read aloud the replies to his wife. "I felt that they would, and it really is something to please a man like Whewell, Lotta. Whewell is quite one of the most rising men of the day; I had my doubts about asking him—asking him to come down here at least; to a man so overwhelmed with work it almost seemed—but, however, I thought he could only refuse. You see he does not refuse; he accepts in the pleasantest manner possible; and so does Challoner. To tell the truth, I did not fancy it was much in Challoner's line either. Challoner is peculiar. Well, Lotta, we are fortunate in everything, you and I; I trust, my dear, I trust," added the young man with a sense of saying something serious—"I trust we always shall be."

Lotta trusted so too, and agreed with dear Robert in everything. There never was so good a patient, so admirable a mother. She ate, drank, slept, rested, nursed her infant, did everything Mrs Burrble told her, and of herself refrained from doing anything which Mrs Burrble would have forbidden her; and the upshot of it all was, that at the end of three weeks, the neat little brougham was brought round from the stables, and into it stepped Mr and Mrs Robert Hanwell, baby and nurse, and off they all drove to Overton to pay a state visit.

"Well, and when are they coming?" inquired Lady Matilda, who by this time knew all about the expected

guests, and took the liveliest interest in their approach. "And has the day been fixed?"

"Yes, indeed, mamma—Sunday next; I thought you knew," replied Mrs Lotta, with her little air of superiority. "I am sure I told you," added she.

"Sunday? That's not proper. Do you allow people to arrive on a Sunday?"

"My dear mamma, what do you mean? No people are going to arrive on a Sunday. I said baby's christening was to be on Sunday." And in the young matron's tone was heard plainly enough, "You really are a very tiresome person, but I have to put up with you!"—"Surely it was the christening you inquired about?" concluded Lotta, wearily.

"Yes, yes—yes, of course; at least something of the sort." Poor Lady Matilda blushed a little, for to be sure it was something of the sort of which she ought at least to have been thinking, and not of two young gallants of whom she knew nothing or next to nothing, and with whom she need have nothing whatever to do. It was absurd her caring whether they came or not; and yet visitors—that is to say, visitors of the right sort—were so very few and far between at the Hall, that her curiosity might have been pardoned. Overton had never made a friend, while Teddy had had, as years went on, to be gently weaned from his,—and the consequence was that, as Matilda would now and then in a freak of *ennui* declare, no one but old women and poor relations ever found their way to the Hall.

"And how well you look, dear!" cried she, now; "and what a little darling he is! Grandmamma's cloak and hood too. Give him to me, nurse; I know the proper arm to take him upon by this time. Look, Overton; Overton, you have not half enough admired my grandson, and yet I do believe that it is you whom he is like."

"Indeed, my lady, I do declare it is then," chimed in

the nurse, to whom a lord was a lord, and who would have sworn a resemblance to Beelzebub himself could she have hailed him as a relation. "Indeed I saw it from the very first—from the day his lordship was over at Endhill, did I not, ma'am?" appealing to her own lady.

"He is a little like uncle Overton about the—hair," said Lotta, doubtfully.

"Or lack of it," observed her other uncle.

"A most decided likeness, *I think*," pronounced Robert, to the surprise of all. But the truth was, that the likeness was there, and somehow they had hit upon it among them. The ugly little baby was like its ugly little grand-uncle; and the father, who had been one of the first to catch the resemblance, now resolved to avow the same manfully.

"What an absurd baby you are!" cried Matilda, delighted with the scene, "to go and choose Overton, of all people. Now if it had been Teddy or me—*we* are the beauties of the family, aren't we, Teddy? So if you had done that, how much more wise and sensible you would have shown yourself, little master, eh?"

"Mamma," began Lotta's reminding voice.

"Dear Overton, you are not beautiful," pursued the heedless Matilda——

——"I think we are making much too long a visit," interposed Robert.

——"And so the poor little man has to go because he is like you," concluded the wicked grandmother.

She begged Overton's pardon with tears of laughter afterwards: she made both him and Teddy merry with her representation of the scene, by turns perking herself up upon the sofa to mimic Mrs Lotta's prim attitude; bustling about to show the politic nurse, deaf and blind apparently to anything amiss; or edging herself towards the door with every gesture of Robert's—the pompous, annoyed, tongue-tied Robert, so visibly, palpably disap-

proving, and yet so helpless,—nothing had been lost upon her. It was not until some time afterwards that she recollected that, after all, no more had been known after the visit than before it of the brilliant Whewell, and the unexplored Challoner.

She had indeed interrogated her son-in-law, though to little purpose.

Whewell he appeared to stand in some awe of, and to know very little about; while regarding Challoner he had but one idea,—“It struck me that he was a suitable person,” he said.

“A suitable person?” quoth Matilda, in reply. “A suitable person. Oh, I think,” drily, “I think, Robert, I understand;” for by this time Robert’s predilection for “suitable people” was no secret to her.

“So now, Teddy, we shall see what we shall see,” nodded she thereafter—namely, on the afternoon when the two gentlemen were due at Endhill, and when the brother and sister, bearing ostensibly Overton’s invitation to shoot and dine, but in reality gratifying their own curiosity, hurried over to inspect. “We shall see what we shall see,” said Matilda, speaking for both as was her wont, though the desire to see was perhaps only her own.

She it was who alone cared for a novelty at Overton Hall, and it was only now and then that she did so care. Why she did at all it is not, however, difficult to imagine, when it is remembered that she was a woman, and a woman who, while happy in seclusion, could nevertheless shine in society. She liked—could she help it?—being admired and applauded. She had felt now and then the fascination, the thrill of being *first* with some one—the loadstar of one pair of eyes, the magnet for one pair of feet—the ear for one speaker, *the* thought of one thinker. Yes, she knew what it felt like to be that. It felt nice. Even when nothing came of it,—and nothing as we know

ever had come of it—since the late Mr Wilmot's courtship had been conducted on the least romantic principles, and could not therefore be considered in the running,—even when nothing came of it, there still remained a recollection of something different from the ordinary everyday comfort of matter-in-fact life. The glamour had been cast on her path once and again, and she had dreamed, and she had suffered. People had predicted that Lady Matilda Wilmot would infallibly be caught again some day, and it had been whispered that a deadly mischief had been done to the heart of this one and that one; that poor Lord George had left the Hall with a longer face than the one he brought there, and that Colonel Jack had changed his regiment and gone abroad soon after his long wintry visit at Overton. He had said he could not stand another English winter, and perhaps that was why he had never reappeared in the neighbourhood. Every one blamed the lovely widow; but perhaps, after all, mistakes are made sometimes.

Those days, however, are past and gone, and if wounds have been made or received, they are healed by time's blessed hand. Lord George is wedded, the Colonel toasts "the ladies" without a tremor, and the lady in particular, the lady to whom his thoughts refer, thinks of him with equal ease and tenderness. He is become a pleasant memory, and even the painful spot is sunlit in the past.

Yes, a heart-whole woman lives at the Hall, a woman with all a woman's hopes and fears—fain to look forward, yet neither ashamed nor reluctant to look back,—able to do without lovers, but not unwilling, not altogether loath,—oh, Teddy, beware! Oh, Teddy, as you gallop along the soft wet sward, under the dropping leaves, beneath the murky sky, beware, beware,—by fits and starts Matilda longs to taste the doubtful cup again.

## CHAPTER VI.

## THE TWO GODFATHERS.

"By wonder first, and then by passion moved,  
They came; they saw; they marvelled; and they loved."

—PRIOR.

It was plain by the whole look of Endhill that the expected guests had arrived, when Lady Matilda and her brother rode in at the gate.

The gate stood open; that of itself showed that Robert was not about. Fresh wheel-marks were visible along the muddy lane without, and the wheels had sunk into the gravel of the little drive, while an unmistakable station-fly stood in the stable-yard.

Robert had not met his friends, for which omission he was doubtless at the present moment lading out excuses and apologies; but the friends were there, and that was everything.

Lady Matilda hopped off her horse like a bird, full of glee at thus, by her smartness, depriving her son-in-law of the felicity of offering his solemn useless assistance; and she had run into the house, and opened the drawing-room door, before any one could make a ceremony of the matter. Teddy had followed, as in duty bound, close at his sister's heels, and there stood the two—the happy, naughty, provoking two,—there they stood, as pleased as possible, Lady Matilda's hat awry, and a splash of mud on Teddy's cheek,—just as Robert was turning round from the window to announce in his most measured accents, "I think, Lotta, I hear horses. Is your mother likely to be over to-day?"

Sure enough he had heard horses, even though by common consent the horses' hoofs had been kept to the

softest side of the drive, and muffled, as it were, more and more as the house was neared,—he had heard, as he could not help hearing, when they came round the last corner, and got into the deep gravel at the entrance door; but as the drawing-room window looked not that way, and as it was, moreover, shut on account of the day being damp, he had fancied himself very quick, and that the riders were yet a good way off, when, behold! they were in the room. How had they got in? How had they made good their entrance without bells ringing, servants flying, bustle and importance? He had not heard a sound of any kind.

“William was in front,” explained Lady Matilda, with bright unconcern, “so he took our horses, and we just came in.”

Now, was not that like her? She “just came in,”—just did what she fancied on the spur of the moment, with no regard to anything or any one; and here he had had no time to tell who or what she was, no chance of making the most of Overton and the best of its people, not even for putting more than that one hasty question ere it was so abruptly and indecorously answered.

Of course Whewell and Challoner looked surprised,—well they might. He supposed that silly feather-headed creature did not care a straw for that, or, more likely, plumed herself upon it as a compliment, without a notion that she had made a mistake, and that she could never now take the place he had meant her to take in his friends' estimation.

Well, it was no use crying over spilt milk; the thing was done, and could not be undone; and, tiresome as it was, it had this in its favour—it showed, and that broadly, upon what easy terms the two families stood. And, to be sure, Lady Matilda was still Lady Matilda, and Teddy, mud and all, was still the Hon. Edward Lessingham; divest themselves as they might of every outward circum-

stance of rank—trample their dignity under foot and throw propriety to the four winds of heaven as they habitually did—the brother and sister must still belong to their order, they could not absolutely unfrock themselves.

With a sense of returning peace to his soul, but, nevertheless, with a stifled sigh and inward frown for what might have been had they, oh, had they only been all he would have had them, Mr Hanwell crossed the room, and confronted the graceless couple. They had not even the sense to see, or at any rate to care—he was by no means sure that the lurking light in Matilda's eye did not mean that she *did* see—how ruthlessly she had upset his programme.

He had meant to send over a note, (for in notes he shone,) to the effect that his friends had arrived, were to spend a few days at Endhill, as Lord Overton might remember he had told him they were expected to do, and that he would esteem it a favour if they might be granted a day in the covers, provided Lord Overton had made no other shooting arrangements, either for the end of that week or the beginning of the next. Why he could not have asked before, no mortal knew; probably some vague idea that he might be thrown over by the two mighty men he had chosen, at the last moment, had to do with it,—probably he had ere now thus suffered, since no very strong counter-attraction would have been needed to make any one throw over Robert Hanwell; but at any rate he had thought it best to be on the safe side, and to have his birds in his hand before reckoning too securely on them.

But the note was written and ready, and there it lay on the hall table, waiting to be despatched by special bearer, as soon as the anticipated arrival should have actually taken place, and as soon as William could have seen the flyman off the premises. For this cause the dog-



cart had not gone to meet the train; the horse—he had but one—was required for William; William was to have ridden to Overton, and so to have timed his arrival there, as to have caught Lord Overton on his return from his daily walk, when it might be counted upon that he would answer at once, and answer favourably. The answer would arrive while dinner was going on at End-hill, and it would be an agreeable diversion to have it brought in, and be able to read it aloud, and give round the invitation which was to prove so welcome.

All of this had not been thought out without care and pains; and it must be conceded that some pity was due to a man who had spent all his leisure moments that day in concocting an elaborate strategic epistle, and had wasted three good sheets of paper over writing it.

The whole arrangement was blasted. He had known it would work well, had hoped so much, and thought so much, and, since leave in general terms had been already granted, had looked forward so much to seeing the matter thus properly and decently brought to a climax,—and now all was undone. By Teddy's look, important and eager, he was too plainly charged with a purpose, and that purpose the dullest could divine; Matilda had obtained the invitation from one brother, and had passed it on to the other to deliver, and the whole patronage and *éclat* of the proceeding was taken out of Robert's hands.

He would not, however, allow himself to be overpowered even by this. "Take the easy-chair, Lady Matilda; Lotta has the sofa, you know; but I believe you like the chair best. What a cold day for you to be out!" (he knew perfectly well that no cold day ever stopped her;) "really we had hardly expected to see any one from Overton to-day; and the roads are so bad too. You find the fire too much? Lotta, my dear, where is the glass screen? I saw it this moment; oh, behind you;—not at all," (to offers of help,)—"I can manage it myself

perfectly. Don't move, Lady Matilda—pray don't move. Will you have a cushion? A footstool?" Poor man, he did his best for her, and she would not give him any help, not the tiniest atom of help. It was cruel of Matilda. Cushion? Footstool? She sat a yard off the cushion, and with her little foot kicked away the foot stool,—kicked it away under his very nose.

"What's all this about, Robert? Get me some tea—there's a good man. Baby well, Lotta?"

At least she asked for the baby; she generally did that, but as likely as not she would never ask to see it; and there she was sitting on the edge of her chair, pulling off her gloves, tipping back her hat, as straight as an arrow, and as bright and pert as a humming-bird—and this was the baby's grandmother.

He stole a glance at his friends. Challoner was still by the window, gazing absently out; it would be hard to say whether he had heard or seen or wondered at anything. Challoner, he now remembered, always had been noted for keeping his feelings to himself; and Whewell, —Lady Matilda was at the moment turning up her face to Whewell, who was standing near, and whom she had recognised without any hesitation at once. She was making a remark about his railway journey down. "You must have come through floods," she said.

"Floods? Yes. Yes—it was very bad—very wet. I mean the whole place was under water," replied the young man, at a momentary loss to remember, when thus called upon, the real state of the case. At least so it seemed; but the truth was this, it was another lapse of memory that was troublesome, he had forgotten Lady Matilda herself, or, to be more exact, he had forgotten, clean forgotten that she was what he now found her. He had had no recollection, no impression of any one of that kind; he had seen her among a number, bright, handsome, gay, and well dressed,—but then, others had been so likewise, and

he met pretty women every day in London. It was beholding her thus in the little cottage room, by the side of her homely daughter, it was meeting her thus suddenly and unexpectedly, that made him stare and stammer. In another minute he was himself again.

For Whewell prided himself above all things on being a man of the world, and he would have despised himself had he not been equal to any occasion, however puzzling. He drew a breath, drew nearer, held a chair, then sat down on it, and in the shortest time possible he and Matilda were in the full flow of chat, without either apparently feeling it in the least necessary to include others in their conversation.

Lotta, who, erewhile in all her glory as hostess, as semi-invalid, or at least convalescent, and at any rate as chief person on the interesting occasion which had brought the two gentlemen down, had been busy with Mr Whewell, and who had thought they were all very snug and comfortable, and that every one must feel how much nicer it was to be within doors on that dreary afternoon, with a good fire and a prospective tea-tray, than wandering aimlessly about the garden and grounds as Robert had at first proposed,—Lotta, poor thing, now resented, no less than her husband did, the disturbing of all their little elements. She did not care to talk to her uncle Edward—(who, indeed, showed no symptoms of any desire to talk to her)—and since mamma had usurped Mr Whewell, there was no one left. Mr Chalonier stuck to his window like a leech, and Robert had returned to him ; so, since the other four were thus left, and since mamma and uncle Edward had chosen to come—it was a pity they had come, but since they had—they ought, at least, to have helped out the visit by making it a sociable general affair. She had been getting on delightfully with Mr Whewell before the others came, but now he had no chance of saying a word to her. It was

not his fault—of course it was not; but mamma would always be first, and she seemed to forget altogether sometimes that she had a grown-up daughter, and a married daughter to boot. Mamma really ought to think of this. It was quite rude to Mr Whewell taking him up in this way, when she, Lotta, as lady of the house and his friend's wife, ought to have been paying him attention: it looked as if he had bored her before, and he had not bored her in the least. She had liked him very much, and he had talked so nicely, and seemed so interested in all she said, and had asked so much about baby, and shown so evidently that he had been pleased with the post assigned to him, that altogether she had felt they were going to be great friends: and then mamma came in, and took him away, and he was never able to renew the conversation; but she was sure he had been quite vexed at being so interrupted.

A good deal of this was for Robert's ear afterwards, and a good deal passed through Charlotte's mind at the time; but outwardly, Mrs Hanwell merely sat up on her sofa, in one of her best dresses, taking care not to ruffle or soil the frills of her sleeves as she poured out the tea with rather a grave face, and an air that betrayed to all that Lotta felt herself out in the cold, and that this, for a young matron with a partial spouse, and an excellent opinion of his judgment as well as her own, was a novel and not entirely pleasing sensation.

Lady Matilda drank her tea, and sent back her cup for more.

The grateful beverage sent up a yet warmer colour into her cheek, and she looked her best—her smiling glowing best,—while poor Lotta, sullen and forlorn, was bereft of all the very small share of outward attractiveness she ever possessed.

It could not pass unnoticed, the contrast. Whewell saw it, even as he held the cup: mean man, he stayed

several minutes by Lotta's side, making his peace, as he told himself, with the tea-maker, and this was how his thoughts were employed!—he noted the curious difference between the two, betwixt the placid, dull, expressionless mask now before him, and the brilliant changeful features to which he was returning. Was it likely he would stay long? Can it be wondered at that all the little bustle over the sugar-basin and the cream-jug could not detain him?

True, he came and went more than once, but it was always on the one lady's errands: he had to bring her bread-and-butter and cake, as well as to have her cup filled twice; he stood about, he fetched and carried, and he stepped backwards and forwards, but it was always backwards, backwards, his feet took him finally; until at length, the business over, and the last attention paid, he fairly settled himself down by Matilda's side, and neither looked at nor spoke to any one else during the remainder of her stay. It was enough: Lady Matilda saw that she was noticed, more than noticed, and frankly she allowed to herself that it was for this she had come. She knew that she was charming, and sometimes the knowledge was too much for her; it needed a vent; it wanted some one to applaud, admire, and flatter; and, no disrespect to Mr Frank Whewell, she would, in her then mood, have made eyes at a field scarecrow.

But we must give our readers some idea of Whewell.

From earliest years he had shown the germ of such mental powers as succeed best in life. He had not been a thinking boy; he had not puzzled his masters and tutors, nor set his parents cogitating about his future; but he had made the most of every talent he possessed, and those talents had been not a few. Concentration, grasp, alertness, tact, and fluency of language, all pointed out unmistakably his path in life. He was to go to the bar, and if he went to the bar, there was no doubt in any

one's mind that he would do well ; he would succeed, rise, and one day rule. So far every favourable prognostication had been fulfilled ; nothing had hindered or thwarted a career which seemed to be one continued triumph ; and though higher heights were still to be climbed, and greater obstacles yet remained to be overcome, there was no reason why, with ordinary good fortune, he should not go on as he had begun ; ambition was his ruling passion, and ambition is an irresistible spur.

But in the little drawing-room at Endhill during the hour that Lady Matilda spent there, Whewell showed himself in another light to what he usually appeared before the world. He liked women, and he liked to be liked by them. Apart from his profession, he liked nothing so well as to talk with them, to listen to their soft replies, to their hopeless arguments, to their sweet laughter. It was a delicious relief to his tired brain to allow itself to be at ease as it were in their presence, to permit himself to ramble over metaphorical hedges and ditches in his talk, avoiding as the very plague the straight hard road which led direct to the point—that very road he would pursue so relentlessly when wig and gown were on ; and it gave him an excusable feeling of satisfaction to perceive that while the latter course prevailed with men, and made him what he was and where he was, the former won for him the golden opinions of the other sex.

Now much of his popularity he put down to his good looks. He valued his handsome face still more than his versatile ability, and therefore the face, or at least Whewell's general appearance, ought to be described. He was getting on to forty in years, but he had looked forty ever since he was nineteen, and would continue to do so until he was ninety. The boys at school had nicknamed him "Grandfather," and by-and-by people would infallibly observe how young he looked, and the same eyes, hair,

and mouth would do duty for both observations : he had not changed a feature or gained or lost anything since going to the university. But he was undeniably personable. He had a slight, firm, well-knit figure, raven-black hair, an aquiline nose, a small well-shaped mouth, a quick turn of the head, and an eye so keenly apprehensive and inquisitive that it seemed at once to take possession of whatever it looked upon.

And of all these good things no one was more aware than Whewell himself.

He thought they gained him female friends, and perhaps in this he was right ; but he went still further, and in this he was undoubtedly wrong. It was his fixed idea that no amount of talent would ever make an ugly face palatable to a woman—whereas the truth is that women like, ay and love, ay and worship, ugly faces every day.

Lady Matilda could have told her lively friend as much ; but very likely if she had, he would not have believed her. And since the cleverest of us must sometimes be at fault, and since such was the opinion of the sagacious barrister, it will surprise no one to hear that the opinion was shared by the sagacious Teddy.

“Oh, you thought him very good-looking, no doubt,” said Teddy, when at length the two took their leave and found themselves on their way home ; “very good-looking, and vastly pleasant. I’ll be bound you did that. Talking away to him there the whole time, and sitting on till it was so dark that we had to have candles. I was quite ashamed of staying so long. I thought we were never going to get away, and there was Lotta fidgeting and fidgeting, and Robert looking round from the window,—what on earth did you do it for ?” he broke off suddenly. “I am sure they didn’t want us all that while.”

“Did they not ? Oh yes, they did ; or, at least, they ought if they did not,” returned his sister, gaily. “I am sure they were deeply in our debt ; I am sure they owed

to us the whole success of the afternoon. It was a success, don't you think? And imagine what it might have been! Failure is not the word. Think, Teddy, of a whole afternoon, a wet afternoon, an afternoon hopeless of interruption or variety or anything, with only Robert and Lotta! Picture to yourself that delightful Mr Whewell——”

——“Delightful! nonsense.”

“Wrecked upon Lotta, stranded upon Lotta, submerged in Lotta,” pursued Matilda, merrily. “Lotta, with her eternal talk about cooks and babies, and ‘our arrangements for this,’ and ‘our ideas about that’; Teddy, put yourself in Mr Whewell’s place, and feel for a moment as he felt. They were in the thick of it when we came in; I saw it in the victim’s face; and even if his face had been hidden, he would have been betrayed by his hanging head and dejected mien.”

“How you *do* talk! ‘Hanging head and dejected mien,’ what on earth—I saw no hanging head. I am sure he seemed as fit a little cock-sparrow as I have ever seen, jabbering away to you by the yard.”

“So he did,—when he had me to jabber to. I rescued him out of the Slough of Despond, and he had the wit to be very, tenderly grateful to his deliverer, moreover; and the grace to rate his deliverance at its proper value, or I am mistaken. Come, Master Ted,” cried Matilda, in her sauciest tones—“come, sir, don’t be sulky. You did your best; you did as well as any could have expected, and as much as in you lay; but you must own that to me—me—me, belongs ‘*la gloire et la victoire*.’ There. Understand that, eh? I did it all: I enlivened a dull visit, took compassion on an unfortunate stranger, and drew him forth from the very jaws of domesticity. Did I not do well for him? I think I did. I think he was worth it, and that he will feel now that there is some one, even in this benighted spot, on whom he is not altogether thrown away.”



"Great cheek if he ever thought anything of the kind." Teddy had had enough of Whewell, and had, moreover, been ill-used all through the visit by everybody. "I was quite astonished to see you make yourself so cheap to that fellow," he proceeded severely. "You were so taken up with him, that you had not a word for the other one, and he looked by a long way the better of the two."

"Glad you thought so. But I left him for *you*. *You* were civil to him, I hope?"

"I? No. How could I? I never had the chance. Robert monopolised him, as you did Whewell. I had nobody."

"Nobody! What are you saying, bad boy? Do you call your own married niece, in her own house, and at her own tea-table, nobody?"

"She is nobody, all the same. She is the stupidest creature—well, you know what I mean," he broke off and drew in a little, since, after all, Lotta was Matilda's child,—"you know," he added, apologetically, "you think so yourself."

"No—no—no. No, Teddy, I never said that. Fie, Teddy! you encroach; you must not say such things; and I would not have any one but me hear you for the world."

"Is it likely I should say it to any one but you?"

"You m—ight. It might slip out. Do be careful."

"Of course I'll be careful: I always am careful; but Lotta is a regular dolt. Except when she was looking at you, she had about as much expression as a Chinese mandarin."

"And when she was looking at me?"

"I say, she didn't like Whewell going over to you, you know."

"Did she not?"

"She thought you were poaching on her lands."

"So I was."

"Why did you do it? I should not have done it had I been you."

"You would, had you been me—that is just it. Oh, I had no particular reason for 'doing it,' as you call it; I just had the inclination; I wanted to amuse myself. And then I thought that if I had the one, you could have the other. I could entertain Mr Whewell, and you Mr Challoner."

"Robert and Lotta each other?" said Teddy, with a grin.

"Oh, they never do anything for anybody; they are no count. You see I took Mr Whewell, and if you had done as much for Mr Challoner there would have been nothing for anybody to complain of."

"By Jove, that is hard! when there was I who would have been thankful of any one, stuck down all by myself in a chair by the fire, with yards of carpet in front of me; and there was Challoner, or whatever his name is, away at the far end of the room, with his back to me, mumbling away to Robert, and Robert to him, without stopping once the whole time; and now you speak as if I had—as if it had been my fault!"

"Don't be incoherent, my dear; how am I to tell what you mean when you muddle up your sentences in that way? And there is nothing to excite your wrath either. I merely meant to suggest that probably the luckless Challoner would have preferred your company to Robert's; and after all, that is nothing to take umbrage at."

"Humph,"—mollified, however.

"What was he like, Ted?"

"Like? I don't know. I never thought of it. He was like other people, I suppose."

"Like other people? Oh! Not in any way particular?"

"Well, not in any way particular. No, I don't think he was."

"But you must have seen *something*?" urged Matilda.  
"You, who had nothing else to do, and no one to listen to, and no one to look at——"

——"I had. I had you to look at."

"Me!" cried she.

"I was wondering what you did it for, and what you could possibly see in that puppy to make such a work about."

"What did I see? Well, now you ask me that in a friendly way, brother, and not in an acrimonious, carping, backbiting spirit, I will answer you candidly: I don't think I saw very much."

"And yet you talked to no one else?"

"And yet I talked to no one else."

"Come, I am tired of the subject," cried she, suddenly; "come, away with it!"—and starting her horse to a canter, nothing further passed of any note between the pair for the time being.

## CHAPTER VII.

"A PRETTY SCRAPE YOU WILL GET INTO."

"It is good discretion not to make too much of any man at the first, because one cannot hold out that proportion."—BACON.

Lady Matilda's sole impression of Challoner had been that of a tall, broad, listless man, leaning against the window-pane in the drawing-room, the while he yielded a sort of pensive half attention to the platitudes of her son-in-law. Whether these had suited him or not, no one could tell. He had not seemed to respond much certainly, but he had listened,—presumably, at least, he had

listened,—and undeniably he had not turned away. He had stood still where he was, and had let the stream flow over his head, and that in itself was enough. He had not broken loose, shaken off his host, crossed the room, and drawn near to *her*; and this was what he should have done to have found any favour in Matilda's eyes. A man ought not to be tamely broken on the wheel; he ought, he surely ought to make some sort of struggle with his fate—some desperate resistance, even when resistance is fruitless. But Challoner had shown no fight, even no inclination to fight: he was beneath her notice.

She would not waste pity or sympathy upon one so insensate—would not throw away gentle amenities on one so indiscriminating; while Whewell—Whewell, who had at once bent beneath her sway, and who had shown himself so apt, so responsive, and so appreciative—Whewell should have all her smiles.

Here at least was one who knew how to value the good fortune which had befallen him in that most ill-favoured spot, who could appreciate having a Lady Matilda to talk to and to look at, who could discern between her and the inert Lotta and the insufferable Robert. Here was one who could claim a privilege and make the most of an opportunity; and the vain creature coloured ominously in front of her glass that evening as she recalled glances and speeches, and the whole little scene at Endhill,—Lotta's prim, prudish attitude, Teddy's impatience, and Whewell's exclusive devotion.

He, Whewell, had had neither eyes nor ears for any one but herself. He had pushed out into the hall by her side when she went, had held her foot and put it in the stirrup as she mounted, and had been the last to go inside as they rode off, standing bareheaded out in the chill November air to watch them down the drive.

She could guess with what reflections he stood there; she could picture to herself, or thought she could, what

were his probable sensations and anticipations at the present moment,—how gladly he would have exchanged his quarters had this been possible, and how joyfully he would appear at Overton next day.

"They will not come till dinner-time," she announced to her brothers. "Robert had a dozen unanswerable reasons why they should not dress here, so we are not to expect anybody till eight o'clock. When they have done their worst on our pheasants, they will come and inflict themselves on us. They are all coming, every man-Jack of them, as Teddy would say. Robert has engaged for the party generally. By the way, I did not say anything about it to Lotta; but I do not suppose that will signify. She will be quite satisfied if dear Robert has arranged it; and dear Robert has taken it upon himself, after due references and inquiries, to answer in the name of everybody. One thing is, he will see that they all turn up, and that not one of them is late. They will be here at eight o'clock to the second, if he die in the attempt. Happily it is dark so long before then, that the poor men will not have their sport curtailed by his anxieties, as those others had in partridge-time. I did pity them; I knew how it must have been exactly. Woe betide the unfortunate finger that ever steals to the trigger, once Herr Robert has decreed that time is up! He will never forgive that shot, more especially if it kills. Well, perhaps it is a good thing for all our sakes that my son-in-law is no sportsman; but what would I not give to make him unpunctual, even ordinarily, decently unpunctual?"

"What do you call being decently unpunctual?" said Overton.

"When a man stands with his watch in his hand, and will have you know the time when you don't want to know it, it's not decent," replied she.

"Was that what happened this afternoon?" inquired her brother, cracking his walnuts,—for the three were

sitting cosily together over their dessert, and Matilda was, as usual, doing most of the conversation.

"No, Mr Inquisitive, it was not what happened this afternoon," retorted she. "Oh, Overton," her attention diverted, "I do wish I could crack single walnuts in my hand as you do. I can't think how you do it," stretching out a white arm, and screwing up a soft and shapely hand with desperate energy. "I have tried again and again, and I never can—oh!"—with a final and utterly ineffectual wrench.

"You couldn't crush a spider with that!" said Teddy, disdainfully. "With that little bit of a wrist you have not any power. There is nothing easier than walnuts," performing the feat again and again. "But, I say, Mattie, what made you give the invitation to those people to-day? I thought you told me that *I*——"

"Of course I did, and you saw I left to you the shooting arrangements; but I had to do something myself; my dear Teddy, Robert's face must have shown you that I had to do something to pacify the storm. We were in the wrong box, you and I; we were dreadful offenders——"

"How?" said Teddy, opening his eyes.

"We had come before our time, my friend."

"Had we? But what did that matter? We did it to be civil; we thought it was a friendly thing to do. What should they come for, then? I'm sure *we* didn't want them."

"Oh, you dear innocent, you don't half know Robert yet. It was all very well our showing attention, hospitality, and so forth; but we, you and I, our two selves in the bodily presence, Ted, *were not wanted*. Can you understand that now? Overton can. He thinks he never is wanted, which is a mistake, on the other hand. If he, now, had found his august way over to Endhill to-day, he would have met with a different reception; but as it was,

it was only poor Teddy and Matilda," shaking her head with mock mournfulness, "and they were sadly in the way."

"And what good did the invitation do?" said Overton, intercepting an indignant protest from his brother.

"Oh, it soothed the ruffled feelings in a wonderful manner. You see, dear Robert really was sadly put out, though Teddy may not believe it; he had had no time, I fancy, to get out his say, to swell and strut, and spread his plumage as he loves to do, and as he never *can* do whenever any one of us is present; and he and Lotta would fain have had their visitors to themselves for a while,—imagine what a fate for any man, let alone a Londoner and a—Whewell. However, Robert would have liked this, and he did not get it, and we—or rather I—was in disgrace. And——"

"Why you more than I?" burst in Teddy, with a black look.

"I am the lady, you know, and the lady naturally takes the lead. That was all, dear," replied Matilda, with one of her swift transitions from sarcasm to gentleness. "That was what I meant, don't you see?" looking at him to make sure she was saying right. "And besides, you know, Teddy, an invitation from the lady of the house always counts for more than one from any of the gentlemen—even from you, Overton. Now does it not, Overton?" eagerly, her warning voice adding, "Say it does."

"Why, yes. Yes, of course. Every one knows that," said Overton, responding promptly to the whip. "Teddy knows that as well as any one, only he forgot at the moment."

"Oh yes, of course—of course. A fellow can't be expected to remember things like that," said Teddy, his brow clearing under the combined influence. "I did not think of it, that was all. Go on, Matilda."

"Where was I? Oh, I was telling you how Robert took my friendly overture. He never suspected, you know, that it was only thought of as we were mounting our horses; he imagined, no doubt, that the idea had been manufactured with all the labour and sorrow and *pros* and *cons* that would have gone to the making had he had a finger in the pie; and actually I did my best to foster this aspect of things. I quite turned our impromptu dinner into an important affair. You should have seen how his grimness relaxed, and how at last a ray of sunshine stole athwart his sad cheekbone."

"Because he was asked *here*?" said Overton, incredulously.

"Because they were all asked here; because he was to bring himself, and his Lotta, and his dashing Whewell, and his statuesque Challoner, and to trundle them all along, packed as tight as herrings in a barrel, over the hill to Overton. You look scornful, most sapient brother! Is not the cause sufficient? Oh, you do Robert injustice—you do indeed; he loves of all things to seek your sweet society, and nothing affords him greater pleasure than—we will not say to dine, but to *say that he has dined here.*"

"*Here?* Nonsense. There is nothing here to make Robert or any one care to come. We are all very well by ourselves, but for anybody else, there can be no attraction."

"Can there not? Now, really, can there not, Overton? Are we no attraction in ourselves, you and Teddy and I?" cried Matilda, with an odd note in her voice. "You are a plain man, Overton, and will return a plain answer to a plain question. Tell me, is there no conceivable attraction here for—for any one, in you, or Teddy, or—or me?"

"None in the least, none whatever," replied Overton promptly, for his thoughts still ran on Robert Hanwell while hers had flown, as may have been guessed, else-



where. "Robert wished to marry your girl, and so he chose to come and visit her here, very naturally I suppose," with a twitch of the lip which needed no interpretation. "Since Robert wished to marry Lotta, it is to be imagined that he cared to be with her now and then beforehand, and as she was here he came here; but now—now that all that is over, there is nothing, nothing in the world to bring him out of his own snug house on a raw dark November night, when the roads are about as bad as they can be, and there is not even a moon to light their way. It is a cool thing to ask any man to do, and I must say, Matilda, I wonder you liked to do it. I am sure I, for one, should not have ventured."

"And I am sure that I, for another, should not, very certainly, very decidedly should not, with an eye to some one else's comfort than good Robert's," said Matilda, laughing. "No indeed, that I should not, my brothers twain, had he and he alone been the proposed recipient of our hospitality. But, bethink you, there are others; and the raw dark November night, and the bad roads, and the no moon, may be no obstacle to *them*. What do you say, Teddy? Do you think that Mr Whewell would leave it? Do you think he would imperil his precious legal life in a four-mile drive through this lonely country after dark, to have another sight of—either of us?"

"Of you? Oh!" said Overton, with a smile.

"Of her, of course," added Teddy. "She is such a creature for getting round people, that she had that ass Whewell all in a buzz before we left. You never saw anything like the way he went on, shoving through the doorway in front of me to get after her. And now she wants him over here——"

"To complete the damage done. Very good, Teddy," said Matilda, approvingly. "I never like to leave a piece of work unfinished, on principle; so, as you say that Mr Whewell has done me the honour to——"

——"To flirt with you," said Teddy, bluntly.

"Oh fie, Teddy! Do not believe him, Overton. I never flirt. It is a thing I would not do upon any account; and as to flirting with Mr Whewell—we were only pleasant, pleasant to each other. And there was no one for my poor Teddy to be pleasant to, and so he is cross with his Matilda," patting his shoulder as if cajoling a fretful child. "Now, was not that it, Ted? Don't be vexed, then: it shall have some one, it shall. Let me see, to-morrow night: whom could we get over for to-morrow night? No one but the Appleby girls, I am afraid. Will Juliet Appleby do, Teddy? She is fond of you, you know."

"I shall take Marion in," said Teddy, decidedly.

"Judy is too young, is she?"

"A wretched school-girl," with contempt.

"A tolerably forward school-girl; she has learned one lesson thoroughly, at all events. But you are wrong, Teddy, she is emerged, emancipated; she is going about everywhere now, and has been since the summer."

"I shall take Marion in," reiterated Teddy. Juliet had caused him offence last time they met, and he thus revenged himself.

"As you please," said his sister. "It does not signify, or rather it is better so; Juliet is much the prettier of the two."

"You don't call those Miss Applebys pretty, do you?" said Lord Overton, who, when alone with his brother and sister, could take a very fair share in the conversation, and make now and then quite a good remark if not called upon to do it. "They are so what is it—unripe?"

"And budding beauty is what poets sing about, and lovers rave about."

"Budding, perhaps, but these are buds that will never blossom. Juliet is pink-and-white, but she has not a

feature in her face, and Marion's teeth would spoil the look of any mouth."

"Well, I'll have Marion all the same," said Teddy, obstinately. When he had a notion in his head he stuck to it, as he said himself; and he now looked defiantly round, as if Marion's teeth and Juliet's pink-and-whiteness had alike been forces used against his determination. "I mean to have Marion; so there,"—bringing down his hand on the table.

"Such being the case, I give way," replied Matilda, humouring his mood. "I give way, and Juliet has Mr Challoner; it will do that chatterbox good to have such a stone wall to expend her artillery upon; she will not get much change out of *her* companion, I should say: then Overton takes Lotta, and Robert must go by himself. He will not mind going by himself for once, when he sees his dear Lotta in the place of honour."

That she meant to have Whewell for herself was thus evident. Challoner might have the right to give her his arm and seat himself by her side—probably had the right, since she had a tolerably distinct recollection of something having been said about his family and connections which rendered it unlikely that Whewell could be in birth his superior,—but what of that? Who was stupid enough to care for that? Certainly not Matilda Wilmot. She was not to know, or at least was not to be supposed to know; and at any rate Whewell she wanted, and Whewell she meant to have.

"And a pretty scrape you will get into with Robert if you do," Teddy reminded his sister; for he too had heard the reference to Challoner's family, and he saw what Matilda was up to, after that fashion he had of seeing things that were not meant for him. "You had better just look out," he warned her.

But to no purpose. A plague on Robert! she must now and then be in scrapes with him, and as well now as

at any other time. She would have her way, and trust to her good luck and her ready tongue to make matters straight with him afterwards, for Lotta's sake, not his own. She wished, oh, how devoutly she wished, that they could have a quarrel—a downright, out-and-out, give-and-take-no-quarter quarrel—so that they might be free of each other for evermore; but for her child's sake she would keep the peace—with intervals for refreshment; and as, happily, she knew his weak points, and could lay her finger on them to heal as well as to wound at any moment, he might be put aside occasionally without much alarm as to the future. Accordingly she laughed at Teddy, and went her way unheeding.

The next evening came, and with it the expected guests. Robert was in great force, had been in force the whole day; and meeting the returning carriage of the Applebys as they drove up to the Hall, was just as it should be. Lady Matilda had with unwonted thoughtfulness provided two new girls for his bachelor friends, and this would be the crowning touch to a day that had been altogether successful. The two strangers had shot well and walked well, and had expressed themselves warmly on the subject: their host had little doubt of being able to obtain for them another day on the Monday, and there was nothing to mar the satisfaction and serenity with which he alighted. The footmen had on their best liveries, and his cup was full.

"Take care, Lotta. Another step, my dear. Are you all right? Fine old hall, Challoner. The pictures are not much, but they are at least genuine. Your collar is turned up, Whewell: allow me." His "allow me" was the pinnacle of his good-humour.

But it was not destined to last long, as those who are in the wilful Matilda's confidence are aware; and only too soon after the party had assembled before the drawing-room fire, did his uneasy fears arise. Until then no

doubts had arisen to disturb his mind, for on this wise he had argued, that foolish and heedless as the young grandmother habitually showed herself to be, she could not go the length of this; she could not, without consulting his opinion or making due inquiries, take upon herself to decide as to which of his guests—of *his* guests—should have precedence, when brought by him to the Hall. He had, indeed, already hinted his wishes; but if, as was, alas! too possible with such an auditor, the hint—the very emphatic hint—had been thrown away, in such a case here he was himself to be appealed to, and here was a good five minutes in which to make the appeal. A whisper to him, an aside through Teddy, a nod of the head, a turn of the eye, would have done it, would have let the hostess know which to make the happy man,—and of course it was Challoner who ought to be the man;—and as a Miss Appleby could be placed upon his other side, so that he need only have the honour of Lady Matilda, and could have the pleasure of an unmarried lady's society at the same time—(Robert was one who took it for granted that a bachelor must always prefer a "Miss")—all being so nicely arranged, Challoner would be well off.

He watched, he waited for the signal that was to bring him into secret communications with Lady Matilda; but Lady Matilda, quite at her ease, made no sign, and he grew restless: and then, just as he was debating within himself how matters would really go, if there would be a scrimmage at the end, or what?—what should he see but Challoner, the Challoner he thought so much of, and cared so intensely to show off before, paired off with an absurd little Juliet Appleby—not even Marion, but Juliet, the school-girl—while Whewell, all radiant and triumphant, talking, bending over as he talked, gallantly escorted the hostess to the head of the table?

## CHAPTER VIII.

## A STRANGE EFFECT.

“Unaiming charms with edge resistless fall,  
And she who means no mischief, does it all.”

—PRIOR.

Never had Matilda looked better.

She was glowing with life and health; and having put on her most becoming dress and ornaments, the plain home-made frocks of two rather so-so-looking damsels, and Lotta's high morning silk with lace *fichu*, which, when put on in her little room at Endhill, had looked quite elegant enough and quite dressy enough for a quiet dinner at her uncle's, became all at once dowdy and ineffective.

They were all much on a par, Lotta perhaps the worst, for Lotta had grown stout of late, and could not stand much *fichu*; besides which, there was a suspicion of being somewhat too tightly buckled in for comfort,—but still the Miss Applebys could not cast stones at her. Juliet's muslin was limp, and did not hang straight, being longer on the one side than on the other; and the lace edgings on both sisters' skirts, on the blue as well as the pink, was cheap, and looked cheap. Little threads hung out here and there, and the colour had slightly run in the washing; while to crown all, the cut on two rather meagre, scrimp, waistless young figures, was not all that could have been desired.

Lady Matilda was in black, but it was brilliant black; it was set off by freshly cut, snowy chrysanthemums, and quivering maidenhair ferns; it was relieved by lustrous opals at her throat and in her ears; and it encircled the roundest whitest neck and arms in the world.

Mrs Hanwell thought her mother over-dressed. It was just like mamma, she said ; and she wondered how it was that Matilda knew no better, and how she, who ordinarily seemed to care so little how she looked, or how old and shabby her clothes were when walking about the lanes, or even shopping in the town, would sometimes take it into her head to flare up into splendour, and throw every one else into the shade. And it must be confessed that the young lady who sat thus in judgment did not like being in the shade, and felt more discomposed than she would have allowed to anybody, at finding herself there.

Her own costume was so nice, so very nice : she had that afternoon tacked in new frilling in the neck and sleeves—her best frilling too, out of a not over-abundant supply—and it had gone to her heart to reflect how it would get crushed and soiled by her heavy fur cloak in the drive to and from the Hall ; but she had felt that the occasion was sufficient. She had meant to look well, and not to grudge a little trouble, or even her favourite ruffles ; she had rubbed bright her large gold locket and chain, and put it on over the lace ; and then there had been a pair of neat little bronze slippers, and mittens, and a brown fan, with a brown ribbon run through the handle to match the slippers. And a clean handkerchief, fine and soft, but not her best Honiton one, which would have been over smart, had been found for the pocket, and a pretty white scarf had been remembered for the head, and nothing had been forgotten, not even the parting directions to nurse, nor the kiss to baby, before she left Endhill.

Nobody had ever crossed the threshold there with a more complacent step ; no one had ever entered the entrance-hall at Overton with a fuller sense of inward assurance.

And in half an hour all was altered, for in half an hour

Lotta had had time to look about her, to take notes and to adjust her ideas, and the result was that she felt oppressed and crestfallen.

Lady Matilda had no fan, no gloves, no bracelets, probably no handkerchief,—but her bare white arms, fringed with the glittering black, would have been insulted by a covering, and made the very idea of mittens loathsome; while the shape of her beautiful head, and the thickness of her hair, turned Lotta's little matronly cap into a superfluous and ridiculous appendage. Lotta, in short, looked as though she had not dressed—what ladies call “dressed”—at all.

“My dear, you might have made more of yourself,” Lady Matilda could not forbear murmuring aside, as the two sat on a sofa together before dinner. “You have evening gowns,” continued she, reproachfully. And then some one had spoken, and there had been no chance of explaining the why and wherefore the evening gowns referred to had not been considered suitable, and altogether it was hard on Lotta.

But her vexation was slight compared with Robert's when the move to the dining-room took place, and he beheld, as we have said, his much too lovely, much too enchanting mother-in-law led forward to her seat by Whewell. He almost hated the agreeable barrister, and scarcely dared to look how Challoner fared. As for that wicked Matilda—but she was irreclaimable.

There she sat, by far the finest and fairest woman present; and there was his friend, but not his chief friend, not the man who should have been where he was,—there was Whewell, cocked up on high, equal to anything, delighted with everything, turning his head this way and that way, by Matilda's side. And there was Challoner—even Challoner could increase the dudgeon of the moment; for the injured, ill-treated, degraded Challoner, was eating his soup with an air of unconcern, which



showed too plainly that whether he had even understood his ignominy or not was doubtful.

Further, however, than that his manner bespoke ease and enjoyment, Whewell gave no just cause for offence ; he did not abuse the prosperity which had fallen to his lot ; he did not attempt to keep Matilda's ear and attention for himself as he had done, and so successfully done, at Endhill ; he had a word, an inquiry, or remark for all about him, took part in divers conversations, told capital stories, and led the laugh with such success, that no merrier meal had ever been known at Overton. Even Robert and even Lotta resumed their usual lugubrious serenity as the courses ran on. "And even Mr Challoner, the stately Challoner, smiled upon us at last," said Matilda afterwards. "He needs waking up, does that poor Challoner. I was quite relieved to see him look more cheerful and less lackadaisical, as he and Juliet advanced in intimacy. Juliet, my dear, that must have been your doing," putting her arm round Juliet's waist as she spoke. "To you must be the credit of thawing the ice upon the Challonerean brow. And it is worth thawing, I believe. Do you know, girls, that he is—what is he, Lotta ? for I protest," laughing, "that I do not know myself."

"He is very nice," said Lotta, warmly, "very nice indeed ; though mamma does not think so," with a little prick of malice.

"Mamma does not think so, indeed ! Bravo, Lotta ! Now, Madame Wiseacre," cried Matilda, who would always have an insinuation said out, whether the speaker liked or not—"now how, pray, do you know that mamma does not think so ?"

But on this occasion Lotta was not unwilling to be explicit. "You have never taken the slightest notice of him since he came," she said. "You have never taken the trouble to speak to him, and you would not have him in to dinner."

"So that is the accusation. Now, hear me. I did far better than have him in to dinner myself; I gave him Juliet."

All were silent.

"I gave him Juliet," repeated Lady Matilda, slowly; "and I think that every young man would allow that he had the best of it in such an assortment. You are too polite, much too polite, to say so to me, young ladies; but you know as well as I do in your hearts that, whatever Mr Challoner's proclivities may be, a young man——"

"He is not so young at all," observed Lotta.

"Any man at all then, or at any rate, the average man of the day, prefers a young and blushing mademoiselle to an old and unblushing—grandmother."

"Oh, Lady Matilda!" They all laughed.

"Grandmother! It is really too absurd," said the eldest Miss Appleby. "When we heard about baby, you know, Lotta, the first thing we all said was 'Think of Lady Matilda a grandmother!' and we laughed so—you can't think how we laughed."

"Lotta thinks there was nothing to laugh at," said Lotta's mother, looking at her with a smile; "and it was very shocking of you, girls, to make sport out of me and my grandson. You might as well have said, 'Think of Lotta a mother!' That was quite as funny, I suppose?" But no one looked as if they had found it so.

"Oh, Lotta seemed quite the right person to have a nursery full," said Marion, candidly. "Lotta always was sober, you know; she—oh, Lady Matilda, you should have heard what papa said!" cried the poor girl, leaving Lotta's unencouraging face to right itself. "Papa said—he is *such* an admirer of yours—and when we told him, he said that you were the handsomest and youngest woman in the county: youngest—you remember, Juliet, how he defined it? that it wasn't years and that sort of thing that made people old; and he said that if Lady Matilda

had a score of grandchildren, it would make not an atom of difference."

"Thank you, my dear. Next time I see your father, I shall say aloud in his hearing that he is the dearest and most discerning old gentleman in the county; and that if there were a score of women he admired more than me, it would make not an atom of difference."

"Now, Juliet," pursued she, when all, Lotta excepted, had done justice to the repartee,—“now, Juliet, for Mr Challoner once more. Mr Challoner once more to the front, please. What is he like? What is his line? What is there in him?”

But this was too much. “I should think,” said Mrs Lotta, with a toss of her head, cap and all,—“I should really imagine—at least any one would imagine—that *I* might be the one to know most about Mr Challoner, as he is now actually staying in our house, and he is Robert’s own friend; while Juliet has only spoken to him—has only *seen* him within the last half-hour!”

“Two hours at least, my dear: don’t be inaccurate because you are cross. And I will tell you why I don’t ask you for information,—simply because I am not likely to get it.”

“Why not likely? You have never asked. I will give it you in a moment.”

“You would, my dear, I know; and I know what the value of it would be, and it would be——” and Lady Matilda made a little snap of her fingers that was hardly dignified, but was very charming. “These things are not in your line, Lotta. You were never any hand with men,” which was unfair, all things considered.

“But then, she never would have been,” said Lady Matilda to herself; “she has not the way with them, and never would have.”

“Now, Juliet is like me—she has perception,” continued she, aloud. “Juliet is a bit of scamp herself,

and so I can depend on her to tell me whether she has found one in Mr Challoner or not."

"Oh, Lady Matilda!"

"Well, child, I am not blaming you—far from it; I appreciate the gift. Come, out with it, for good or for evil, for better for worse. Give us your experience, your valuable experience; Mr Challoner is——?"

"To tell you the truth, then, Lady Matilda, I would gladly have exchanged companions with you."

"You would, you monkey? I believe you; from my heart I do. What!—he was not responsive, was he not, Juliet? Now, Lotta, be quiet. I see the man is a man of lead."

"He is not *at all*: not in the *very least*."

"Oh yes, he is: Juliet says it, and Juliet must know."

"But I did not say it, Lady Matilda," protested Juliet; "I only said, and that when you asked me, and *made me say it*——"

"I know, I know: never mind, Lotta, you goosey; nobody minds Lotta in this house—though she reigns supreme at Endhill, no doubt. But here I am the only person to be in awe of, d'ye hear that?" pinching her ear. "Now get on with your tale. You gave him up? Did you give him up? Did you find him past endurance? Lotta, go away; go and talk with Marion over there: don't listen to us,—that's right! Now, Juliet?"

"I must say he was rather difficult to get on with, Lady Matilda."

"Difficult! How difficult? What shape and form did the 'difficult' take?"

"He never originated an idea, to begin with. And then he was so—don't you know?—absent. He did not seem to take any notice—I mean he had no interest; all he cared to talk about was the shooting, and I know nothing about shooting—how should I?" said poor Juliet, plaintively. "I tried him on all sorts of

other things, indeed I did. I told him all about the neighbourhood, and the people, and—and everything I could think of; and then, when I had said all I possibly could, and had racked my brains to make the most of a subject, he would just answer me, and let it drop. I had to do it all over again with something else, you know. It wasn't encouraging, was it?"

"Bad, bad,—very bad. Just what I had expected, however. I must say I object to have my pet topics of discourse 'let drop,' myself; and you certainly had a hard time of it, Judy."

"The worst of it was, he was always looking at you." Incautious girl, the words escaped her ere she knew, and Matilda heard them, and stopped short, although she had drawn her breath, and opened her lips to speak again.

She stopped short in her surprise.

"Looking at me!" she said, at last.

"He was, indeed. He was always looking your way, at least, and listening to what you and Mr Whewell were saying. I suppose he must have found your conversation more amusing than mine, and no doubt it was," owned poor Juliet in her mortification. "Mr Whewell is amusing, is he not?"

"Oh, very."

"And pleasant? And—and——"

"Everything."

Miss Appleby sighed.

"Come, I have a spark of generosity in my nature," said Lady Matilda, suddenly, "and my Juliet shall profit by it. You have told me all that was in your heart, Judy, you have hidden nothing of your discomfiture and—disgust. Never mind, never mind——" as Juliet protested. "It is too late to draw back now, much too late; and you have done so well, it would be a pity to spoil the effect. I see the scene. I see the dauntless Juliet plodding on, and the ungrateful Challoner lifting his eyes

to higher spheres. (That's me," in parenthesis.) "I am the higher sphere, my love, and it is not to be wondered at if a man of forty—he looks about forty, I should say—if he did prefer—I mean, if he would have preferred my society to that of a little lass of eighteen. Had he been twenty years younger, Juliet—oh, Juliet, you have it all before you. Juliet, Juliet, you need not envy me my poor autumnal triumph. Every year you will change your style of admirer, my dear; at present you have one kind, in another year you will have another kind—it is so long ago with me that I forget the exact ages, but they keep marching on as you march—until at my years none are left to you but a scattered remnant, here and there a susceptible widower, or a man who has lost his first love, or a foreign diplomatist who wants an English wife to head his table, or——"

"Oh, Lady Matilda, how can you say so? You know very well——"

"Very well all that you can say, child," with unaffected disdain. "Oh yes, I know all about it; trust me. But, Juliet, what I meant to say was this. You envy me Mr Whewell, my dear delightful Mr Whewell, and here-with I make a present of him to you. Now this is how the deed of gift shall be drawn out. He sings; well, I love music, but I fear I do not greatly care for musical people, more especially when the fit is on. Fact is, I hate 'em. So Mr Whewell shall not have the felicity of being accompanied by me in 'Darby and Joan,' or 'In the gloamin', oh, my da-ärlin'," mimicking, "those two abominations which are no doubt the flower of his *répertoire*; he shall not be permitted to shine in them, but he shall hum his bass to Juliet's sweetest treble, while I, even I—hearken, O Lotta, hearken, O Marion,—I will immolate myself on the altar of——"

The door opened, and she was prevented saying Chal-loner's name by the entrance of Challoner himself.

## CHAPTER IX.

## ROBERT HAS CAUSE FOR COMPLAINT.

'You always do too little, or too much.'

—COWPER.

There was nothing in the faces of any of the ladies to indicate that they had been interrupted in their conversation. Lady Matilda, even while turning round courteously to include the new-comers in the conversation, continued to address the youngest Miss Appleby—altering her topic but not her tone,—while the elder sister and Mrs Hanwell resumed the thread of a confidence that had been suspended for a moment by the last remark.

"You see," said Lotta, earnestly, "I could have overlooked it if it had been the first time, and if I could have put any faith, any real faith, in the woman's professions. But if once a servant has been untrustworthy, you don't know how to believe her again."

"Yes, indeed," replied her companion, endeavouring to look as attentive as before; "yes, indeed. I know that is what mamma always says, and——"

——"I could never have let her out of the house with any comfort, could I? And if there had been a message to be taken—and we so often need to have messages—at least errands to be run—down to the village, you know, to the post, or for things that cook wants—cooks always want things when there is no one handy to go for them——"

("I hear Lotta and her cooks," murmured Lady Matilda, aside to Teddy.)

——"If we had wanted to send anywhere, it would always have been 'Who was to go?'" proceeded the unconscious narrator. "Now Sarah has always seemed

willing, and so I always let her; and it was only the other day—though I must own I had my suspicions before—but it was only the day before yesterday, something was wanted for yesterday's dinner, something that cook had to make ready the day before, for we had these gentlemen coming" (lower), "and so, of course, cook was anxious to do her best, and she asked if Sarah might run up the road for her."

"——Don't you find the fire rather hot, dear?"

"No, thank you, never mind." Lotta's tongue was not to be stopped in that way.

"Well, Marion, I do assure you that the girl took an hour and a half, and she had not half a mile to go! She did indeed; for I looked the clock, and it was four o'clock when she went, and half-past five when she came in. It was dark, quite dark outside, but I heard her come in and go up the back-staircase, so I called out, 'Is that Sarah?' and it was."

"Oh, that was too bad. But——"

"She had only to run up the road to Farmer Dunstable's for some cream—at least, to let them know that extra cream would be wanted next day; she had not even to wait for it, and she could not pretend that she had when I taxed her. The cream was wanted for the white soup, you know; cook does make such excellent white soup, and she is so economical over it; she never thinks of veal and chicken; she makes a bit of the neck of mutton do, with a rabbit. Of course, I let her get what cream she likes; for, after all, a shilling's worth of cream goes a long way; and Mrs Dunstable's cream is always good and thick. So when she asked if some one might be sent to the farm, I said, 'Send Sarah.' I said it at once, never thinking, never for a moment imagining, you know, that she was not to be trusted. Robert would have sent the groom, but he had hurt his foot; and as Sarah has nothing much to do about four o'clock—she



never has—I suggested her myself. She brought in my cup of tea first—Robert does not take tea—and I remember that I thought it rather strange Sarah's bringing it in so early, for I don't usually have it till five, or nearly five,—and she excused herself by saying that she thought I looked tired, and would be glad of my tea. It was that I might not find out how long she stayed, you know."

"Dear!" said Miss Appleby, properly shocked. Resistance was of no avail; the grievance, she saw, must be heard out.

"I could hardly believe it, Marion, and, of course, I have felt it dreadfully. Nurse—I mean Mrs Burrble, not Hannah—nurse did give me a sort of hint a week ago, at least she says now that she meant it for a hint,—by the way, Mrs Burrble can stay on with us another week, Marion—is not that nice? I was so anxious that Hannah should have her in the house for a little after Hannah had begun to take baby in hand; and Robert has been so good, he says under the circumstances I am quite right, and he does not mind the expense at all. Of course she is expensive, but she is such a nice woman, and I can talk to her about all sorts of things. I told her about Sarah at once, and then she reminded me that she had given me that hint. She had said, 'Are you keeping on Sarah, ma'am?' And she tells me now that she had meant me to notice it, and to ask why she inquired. But it never occurred to me. Now, would it to you?"

"Not for a moment."

"And I was not to blame, was I?"

"Not in the least."

"Well, it is a good thing now that it is off your mind," continued Miss Appleby, in a summing-up judicial tone; "and as you have given her warning——"

"Oh, but it is not off my mind at all. You see I did not take in what Mrs Burrble meant, when she asked,

‘Are you keeping on Sarah?’ What was I to say? Of course I *was* keeping on Sarah. So now Sarah says——”

“Young ladies, young ladies, where are your manners?” Never had human voice sounded more musical in the ears of the unfortunate Marion Appleby than Lady Matilda’s did now. “Fie, both of you! usurping one another in this way,” continued the hostess, with the most delightful reproach. “Fie! get up; split into two, instantly. I really wondered how long this was going on,” she proceeded, looking from one to the other as they stood up at her command, “and at last I saw something must be done. Look over there.”

Over there accordingly the culprits looked, and indeed what they beheld justified Matilda’s complaint. Lord Overton, Mr Challoner, Robert, and Teddy were all silently drinking coffee, having apparently exhausted every single thing they had to say to each other before they left the dining-room. Whewell was more lucky, but still only relatively lucky: he had the resource of the china ornaments on the mantelpiece and Juliet Appleby; but even he was less lively than before, while there was no doubt that the other quartet felt themselves, if not aggrieved, at least unwanted, unneeded, superfluous.

As soon, however, as it was seen that the ladies were no longer too deeply engaged for intrusion, they were approached on all sides,—the two Overtons, elder and younger, with one accord addressing the ever-pliant accommodating Marion Appleby, who was always ready to listen, and never had much to say; while Mr Challoner, apparently impelled by a sense of duty, made an opening observation to Mrs Hanwell, and Matilda herself was left to her son-in-law.

Well, she could not help it; she had meant, had certainly meant, to take that opportunity for making amends to Challoner, and she would undoubtedly have

preferred him, even him, to Robert; but he had begun with Lotta, and so there was an end of it. No one could say it was her fault. Still it was the hour for sacrifice, so if balked in one direction she would strike out in another; she would make the best of the bad bargain the fates had given her for the nonce; and accordingly—

“I am having new covers in my boudoir, Robert.”

“Indeed? Are the old ones worn out, then?”

“Worn to rags. But I daresay I should have had them still, if Teddy had not let fall a bottle of ink, and it went all over the sofa, cushions and all, last week. Perhaps on the whole it was the best thing he could have done.”

“You are a philosopher, Lady Matilda.” The effects of a good dinner and a pleasant after-dinner were not without their effect on Mr Hanwell; he found Lady Matilda more sensible than usual. “And what are the new covers like?” he inquired with interest.

“Really not very unlike the old ones. You may not discover any difference; I should not be surprised if they never catch your eye at all, unless you remember my having told you.”

“And why did you get them so much alike? For the sake of the rest of the furniture, I suppose? It is really an important matter when you begin to alter furniture,”—he was a great man for furniture,—“and I suppose you had to suit your carpet and curtains? Or have you new curtains?”

“Well, yes, I have. I did not need them a bit, and I don’t know why I got them, but there they are.”

“And where did you go?”

“I had patterns down from several places, but one little man in Tottenham Court Road sent by far the best. Two or three of them would have done. If you and Lotta are in want of any more things, I advise you

to try there ; I am sure he is cheap, and I have kept the address. Those girls want it too," looking at the Miss Applebys.

"Are they furnishing, then?"

"They are talking of doing up their drawing-room. Between ourselves, I doubt the result; four or five people all suggesting, and scheming, and plotting, and planning—to say nothing of quarrelling and sulking over it—is too much. They will come to grief sooner or later, you may depend upon it, and already there are rumours of dissension afloat. I fancy 'papa' does not see any reason for doing it at all; papas never do, you know."

"Exactly: they never do. My father was most unwilling to make any changes at the old house, I remember," observed Robert, sitting slowly and heavily down on a low chair beside her, (oh, heavens, this was more than she had bargained for!) "and it was some time before we could get the old gentleman to acknowledge that there was anything of the kind needed. One of the floors was actually giving way; and when the library carpet was taken up," continued he, stretching out his legs comfortably in front—"when the old green carpet was up that had been down for thirty years, I believe you could see daylight through it! Oh, there were holes in a number of the carpets."

"They were not visible holes, then," replied Lady Matilda, graciously; "invisible to me, at any rate. I saw nothing but what was the picture of comfort and—and" (again that word 'respectable' in her mind, and again it would not do)—"and everything. But with such good rooms," proceeded the speaker, hastily—"with such first-rate rooms as they have at your father's, it is easy to make them look well. I was never in a better planned house in my life."

"Well, really" (he hardly knew what to do under such

amiable treatment), "really, you—ah—you are very kind to say so. And it is tolerable in its way; not like this, of course, not to be compared to Overton; but it is certainly a good old-fashioned building, dry and wholesome. And when are you thinking of going over again, Lady Matilda? They will be most happy, you know. We propose taking baby the end of next week, and stopping over Sunday—Lotta perhaps longer; certainly they will try to keep her longer,—she is a great favourite with them all, and I may leave her for a week or so if she wishes it. I must come back myself. We begin our new stables on Monday week, and I must be on the spot while it is being done. Besides the chance of blunders, I always make a point of being at home when the workmen are about. You never know what they may be up to. And then we have at present no very good place for keeping our silver. How do you do about your silver here? Have you a safe?"

"Yes—no. At least I don't know,—I suppose so. I never thought about it." She was not quite sure that she knew what a safe was, but had discretion enough to keep her ignorance to herself.

"Well, I have almost made up my mind to have one," proceeded Robert, "and I will tell you where I mean to place it. I have my own ideas on the subject. There is a little cupboard that opens out of the hall, pretty far back, underneath the staircase, just beyond where the coat-stand is——"

"I know—I know." Her tone meant, "Stop that, at any rate," but happily he was insensible to it.

"You know? Well, that little cupboard is pretty well hidden, and it goes pretty far back. A safe could be fitted in at the back, and made fast either to the wall behind, or to the floor—either would do. I am not sure which would be best? Which should you say?"

"I should consult the man who comes to put it up."

"Oh, I never do that,"—he shook his head emphatically. "No, no, Lady Matilda, I know better than to do that. I have my own ideas about things, and I generally find they are correct. I do not want to boast, but really I have hardly ever—I may almost say never—had to repent when I have taken a thing into my own hands."

She sighed, but she had to endure: for fully half an hour did he run thus smoothly on; and as every one else either was, or was obliged to appear to be, equally agreeably engaged, she had no pretext for rising, and no hope of deliverance.

At length, however, came a break. One voice dropped off after another, more than one eye was directed to her, and she could with all propriety herself respond to the general mute appeal for a change of scene.

"We were to have some music?" suggested Whewell, approaching. "May we hope, Lady Matilda——"

She rose smiling.

"Let him sing alone," said Robert in a low voice. "He can; and he can play for himself too." Whewell had gone to open the instrument. "I think," continued Robert, with what was for him a great effort of moderation,—*"I think, perhaps, Lady Matilda, you have not noticed that Challoner—ah—I fancy he would like if you would speak to him a little. And I think you would be pleased with him,—I really do. Quite so,—I mean if you have the opportunity,"* in reply to a hesitating glance towards the piano. "I understand: it will do by-and-by—quite well, by-and-by."

Well, she would, by-and-by. Robert had a show of reason on his side; and however dull and uninteresting his friend might be, it was true that, for her own sake, she ought not to be rude to any one. And then Juliet had said that Challoner had been looking at her. Certainly she would do something, if it were ever so little, for him—by-and-by.

But, alas! by-and-by was long in coming. One song succeeded another, and Whewell found each more charming than the last. He did not sing with her, having found out, with his native quickness of perception, that she would prefer going her own way unmolested, and that the few notes he threw in once or twice had only resulted in confusion; he had put her out, and a thousand apologies could not put her in again. He promised in future to abstain; but to sing with him for an auditor, for an enthusiastic demonstrative auditor, was pleasant enough—so pleasant, indeed, that time drew on, and there was no appearance of an end to it.

It was not that Challoner was forgotten,—it was that she could not be troubled with him. And, after all, why should she be? She thought—as soon as the effect of Robert's leniency had worn off a little—she thought Mr Challoner did well enough without notice. It appeared to be all one to him where he was, or what he was doing, and looking at him, as he and Overton sat together at the far end of the room, with evidently quite a fellow-feeling of comfort and repose in obscurity, she vowed it would be a pity, altogether a pity, to unsettle the minds of either.

Now Whewell was different: Whewell could not be happy unless he were in the front of everything: whatever was the order of the day, he must have a part in it, and could perform that part well; and such being the case, it was a pleasure to do anything for him. But if a man has no discernment, sees no difference, and would as soon be at the bottom as at the top—why, leave him at the bottom.

At length, however, Whewell had implored, and praised, and thanked, and flattered, until it seemed as though nothing else were left to be said or looked. It grew late. "I believe I ought to see after people," said Matilda, rising. "Juliet, take my place; and you, who

accompany so much better than I do, play this for Mr Whewell."

Thus she was free, and now surely was Challoner's time come? But no. Unfortunately no one but Matilda herself knew what Matilda meant to do, and two at least of the party were ill enough pleased with what she had already done. Neither of these was Lord Overton—he was happy enough: he thought the evening had gone off well—better than he had expected; and that as every one was doing as he or she liked best, all was right. Whewell he considered was a noisy fellow, but noisy fellows were of use sometimes, and it was lively to hear the piano going. For himself, he liked Challoner better, infinitely better; but Challoner could not help things off as Whewell did; and any way the dull dinner-party would soon be over, and he hoped Matilda would not soon think it necessary to give another. Here was Matilda coming; and had Matilda come, had she got his length and accosted him, she would have been received with his usual smile. But an angry voice stopped her midway.

"You have come at last," said Teddy, in her ear. "And time you did, I should say. You and Juliet have behaved nicely to the rest of us,"—for Juliet had not shown that sense of desolation which he had expected on seeing him turned into her sister's cavalier for the evening. "She is going on with that ape, Whewell, with a vengeance. And so were you. And you treat that other one, as nice a fellow as ever lived, as if he were a dog."

"I do nothing of the kind: I don't know what you mean."

"He has sat in that chair ever since we came in from dinner, and nobody has gone near him but Lotta."

"Overton is sitting by him now."

"What's Overton? I don't believe he has said ten words since he came in. And Juliet too. Tell you what, Robert says——"



"What do I care for Robert? Let him say anything."

"He is as savage with you as ever he can be."

"Savage! How absurd you are!" cried Matilda, but still under her breath, though with a movement of the shoulder which carried its own emphasis. "Let Robert mind his own business. It is not for him to dictate to me; I can judge for myself, I should hope." And not a syllable would she speak to Challoner after that.

"The carriage is here," said Lotta at last. "Good-bye, mamma; we must not stop a minute, as it is raining. My cloak is down-stairs, thank you. It is in the library." And the next thing was the cold touch of a limp and indignant hand, as Robert, no longer under the influence of dinner and claret, followed his wife out into the hall.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE REAL WOUND AND THE APPARENT ONE.

"He smarteth most who hides his smart  
And sues for no compassion."

—RALEIGH.

Challoner had been in the background throughout the evening described in the last chapter, but he was no longer destined to remain so; he was, within a few minutes of leaving the drawing-room, to be brought as prominently before the public as would have satisfied a dozen Whewells.

The ladies were being shawled and hooded in the library, and Lotta was in the act of having her last golosh drawn on, when a noise from without made them all turn their heads, wondering aimlessly, as females do, what was the matter.

There had been the sound of a breakage, a crash and a smash : not a remarkably violent smash ; probably a lamp knocked over, or something as bad as that—annoying, but not more ; and no particular attention might have been excited, had it not been immediately followed by more than the usual bustle and disturbance.

“ I say ! ”

“ By Jove ! ”

“ Are you hurt ? ”

Then “ handkerchief ” and “ bleeding ” were indistinctly caught, and finally a whole sentence reached their ears, in Robert’s voice, but in a voice raised higher and more hurried than its wont, — “ Sticking-plaster ! I don’t believe she has such a thing in the house.”

That was enough ; all flocked out to hear and see, and Lady Matilda joined the group from the ante-room. What had happened ? Who was hurt ?

The questions were answered by a blast of cold air driving in through a broken window of some size, and further, by the sight of Challoner standing before Whewell, who was busily engaged tying a handkerchief above his wrist, and at the same time bending down so close over it, as to show he was endeavouring to discover something, probably the extent of the damage done.

The two were underneath a circle of lamps, and blood was dripping from their hands.

“ If I could only see—if I had anything to clear the wound. Water—get some water,” cried Whewell ; “ cold water and a sponge ! Look sharp with it ! ” as the servants hung about uncertainly. “ I can’t see anything for this infernal blood.”

“ What do you want to see ? ” said a voice at his elbow.

“ Oh, Lady Matilda ! Beg pardon, but can’t you get me *something* ? ” replied Whewell, somewhat taken aback, although appearing to more advantage in his concern and abruptness than in any previous phase. “ Can’t you get

me anything to stop the bleeding? Friar's balsam—that's it; that's the thing I want. Oh, you have not any? Oh, what have you, then? And where is that water?" impatiently looking round. "I sent them for it an hour ago. I could at least bandage the cut, if we could make sure there was no glass sticking in; but I can't see anything for this—— Oh, it's here! Here with it then. Hold the basin under—right under, can't you? See what a devil of a mess you are making! Excuse me, Lady Matilda," in another tone,—“excuse me, but you are in my light. Now then, Challoner, off with your coat! Here, you, help him!"

"No, nonsense!" cried Challoner, resisting the footman's touch. "Thanks all the same, but there is really nothing to make a fuss about."

"Never mind that; off with his coat, I tell you! How the deuce do you suppose I am to get at the place up inside the sleeve? There, that's right. 'Jove, how it bleeds! But we'll collar it yet," sponging away. "Now, does it hurt? Do you feel anything sharp? Any pricks?"

"Ah!" cried Challoner at the moment.

"I thought so. Yes; and a nice thing it would have been to have tied that in," rejoined Whewell, holding up a narrow strip of glass half an inch long. "D'ye see that? Eh? Why, it's better already. Hold his arm there, will you? Hold it as hard as you can, just above the elbow joint; feel for the pulse, and dig your fingers in. Don't be afraid; dig them in as hard as ever you can. Can anybody give me a good long handkerchief? A silk one would be the best." Teddy was half-way up-stairs ere the words were well out of the speaker's mouth. "I say, bring two," shouted Whewell after him.

"You are very good, but—you make too much of it," said Challoner, with a restive motion that implied dislike to being thus the centre of attraction. "I am sorry I

have broken the pane," looking at the shattered glass, which nobody had as yet attempted to clear away; "and every one will take cold," he added.

"Yes, to be sure. *I* am warm enough; but it is shivery, rather," said Whewell. "If you will go back to the drawing-room for a few minutes, ladies, we shall soon be ready for you," subjoined he, concealing, if he felt it, a natural reluctance to lose his audience. "I shall manage now; I shall just tie it up till we get back to Endhill, and then no doubt Mrs Hanwell will furnish me with plasters and balsam. You have them? Yes; that's right. He will do very well till then. It will not take long now, Challoner. Don't catch cold, like a good fellow, for I can't let you move yet. What's this? Brandy? Ah, that's the thing to keep up his fettle! I thought he was growing a little white about the gills."

The patient laughed outright.

"You may laugh—laugh away," proceeded the extempore surgeon, with the end of a handkerchief between his teeth; "but it's all very fine. Drink your brandy, my friend, and be thankful. I should not mind a nip myself, if you would be so good, Lord Overton. Oh, don't go yourself—pray don't go yourself. I would not on any account. What a good fellow he is!" he added, for the benefit of those left.

Only Challoner and the footman were left; every one else had gladly seized the opportunity to beat a retreat from the raw night-air, which continued to pour in through the broken window, since the brown paper, with which it had been proposed to patch it for the night, had not yet appeared—even Robert had retired with the rest into the drawing-room, there to be interrogated and listened to.

"He was pulling down the window. The window was open, and we all felt cold. You kept us waiting so long, Lotta. I do wish, my dear, you could manage to be a

little quicker sometimes. What had you to do but put on your cloak——”

“My dear Robert, I was not a minute. But Janet had put my cloak underneath Marion’s, and at first we could not distinguish which was which—these fur cloaks are all so much alike: indeed we could not see that there were two; we thought there was only one.”

“Oh, never mind—never mind. How your tongue *does* run on, Lotta!” cried Lady Matilda, who never could prevent herself from speaking to her daughter as if she were still at home and unmarried. “Tell me about the accident, Robert. How could he do it? What was there in closing a window to break it all to pieces, and cut Mr Challoner’s hand so badly?”

“It is unfortunately not the hand, but the wrist—just in the worst place, where the large artery is.”

“But how did he do it? How did he do it?”

“How did he do it? I do not know, I am sure: I cannot imagine. I was going to draw down the window—at least Lord Overton was going—and I was just going, when Challoner, who was in front of us both, turned round and did it.”

“Did it? Did what?”

“Pulled down the frame, and the cord broke, and it came down with a run.”

“Oh!”

“He says the frame had stuck,—swelled with the rain, no doubt.”

“Oh!”

“It was a pity your having no remedies handy,” proceeded Robert, beginning to recollect himself. “If we had been at Endhill——”

“I have two or three kinds of plaster,” cried Lotta, with a glance at her mother; “and we have arnica, and several things.”

“Give him the arnica when you get home, my dear,”

observed Lady Matilda, drily. "Pour in a good supply. You are a very erudite person, we all know, Lotta. So Mr Challoner may be safely handed over to your care."

"Arnica is not for an open wound, my love," explained Robert, in a somewhat short aside. "It is poison, and should never be applied when the skin is broken; but a balsam for stopping bleeding is really, really a thing every one ought to have," continued he, more briskly. "You see this case shows——"

"He's all right now," announced Teddy, coming in. "He says it's nothing, and——"

"It was a great thing Whewell being with us," continued Robert, unwilling to lose the ear of the house. "Whewell is certainly a wonderful man. He can do anything he sets his hand to."

"He makes a lot of row about it, though."

Teddy's amendment was not uncalled for: even from where they stood, there could be heard the dictatorial tones and loud laugh of the now excited and dominant guest; and grateful as they could not help being for knowledge and skill so valuable at such a moment, perhaps no one could have asserted that a little less assumption would not have been more becoming.

However, that was neither here nor there. Whewell had done well,—had manfully rendered services for which praise and thanks were due, and these should certainly be accorded him; while Challoner—Lady Matilda in particular was not quite sure how she must now address Challoner. She must address him somehow, of course; but could she at the eleventh hour expect him to care for civility and attention so much overdue? Could she suppose that he was not to see that he had been passed over and neglected throughout the entire evening, or imagine that he would now be thankful for a crumb from her table, flung to him so late, and for such a reason? She could but hope he would not re-enter the drawing-room, and that a passing

inquiry and expression of sympathy would be all that she would need to bestow in the hall. She would accompany the others out into the hall to give it, and—but hope was vain: the outsiders were heard approaching even as she pondered.

In they all came, Challoner first.

By common consent he had been ushered to the front, in virtue of his misfortune; and the eagerness, the queries, and condolences with which he was instantly assailed, vindicated the justice of the sentiment.

Everybody now spoke to Challoner, except the one who should have led the way; and even Matilda had, with an effort and a blush, stepped forward to do her tardy part, when she caught the anxious stimulative eye of her son-in-law, and the demon within her rose. Robert's look said, "Yes, go, go: now is your time; now you can make up for the past; now you can retrieve your error: be quick, be quick!" And in answer to that "Be quick, be quick!" a rebellious voice within retorted, "I shall do nothing of the kind."

We have said Matilda was a sweet-tempered woman: but there are things that would set up the back of an angel; and if there was one person on earth who was a proficient in saying or looking those things, it was Robert Hanwell.

Perhaps he might not have provoked everybody. His absurdities, his self-complacency, and his unconscious arrogance, would not have caused some good souls more than a faint annoyance, or they might even have derived from them a distinct source of amusement; but with such he must have had nothing to do as a relation, and they must have come but seldom into contact with him. To Matilda he was as a rough collar constantly worn: he could not be shaken off, he could not be thrown aside; he was always there, and he was always making himself felt to be there. Moreover, it is probable that in the presence of his mother-in-law the unfortunate young man

showed to his worst—that he set her on, out of a spirit of opposition, to do things which she would not otherwise have done; and that he in turn, fretted and irritated by her levity, made himself yet more ridiculous by his ill-humour than she would have made him by her wit.

On the present occasion the ill-humour was more than ordinarily disastrous. Matilda was vexed with herself, and was really anxious to make honourable amends to Challoner for her former slighting demeanour towards him. Now a finer shade of perception than Robert possessed would have enabled him to see this, and to stand back and let her now aroused and womanly compunctions have their full swing: she would, following the dictates of her own heart, have said all that was kind and gentle; she would have won forgiveness in a moment. But just as she was about to step forward, or rather had actually taken a step or two, and was hesitating for a suitable word to begin with, a pressing and perturbed countenance must needs be thrust forward, and all was lost.

Who was he, that she should do his bidding? “Know your place, sir,” was written in every line of the frown which gathered on her brow, and she turned on her heel—to find Whewell at her side.

“We shall be off immediately now, Lady Matilda. The carriage had been sent round to the stables, but it will be here in a minute. Pray forgive Mr Challoner: he would never have forgiven himself, I assure you, if he had bled to death in your hall.”

“It was not so bad as that, I hope.” Lady Matilda responded to the light tone so coldly that the speaker looked surprised.

“You have no doctor near at hand, I am told?” rejoined Whewell, leaving banter alone, as he perceived it to be inappropriate.

“Within two miles—within a mile and a half, I should say. That is pretty well for a country place, I think.



We have no great need of doctors in Overton parish. If Mr Challoner needs a doctor——”

“Oh, not a bit of him; not now, at all events. These bull-dog kind of men can stand anything; and this was merely—— Oh, Mrs Hanwell is going. Good night, then, Lady Matilda; we shall see you in church to-morrow. And pray remember that you have promised to coach me up in my new duties; I look to you to pull me through. Good night. Where,” looking round——“where is my patient?”

He was behind, awaiting his turn; and he was unsupported, or rather his parting moments were uninjured by Robert. Robert had gone out with the Miss Applebys, who had stayed with the rest, no one knew why, and they were now being escorted to the door by him and Teddy. Lord Overton was, as usual, doing nothing, and visible nowhere. “Mr Challoner,” said Matilda, very gently, “I cannot express to you how sorry I am.”

She wished she could have said more, wished she could have thought of more to say; but no civility, no condolence, no repentance would furnish her with a single other word at the moment; and before she could make a second attempt, or conjure up any further pretext for detaining him, he was gone. Matilda uneasily followed. What could she do? Was there anything left for her to do? She was cudgelling her brains as she wandered on with a vague idea of being friendly in not being left behind, when anew there seemed to be a stir without, and it was Robert's voice which, as before, was the presager of evil.

“Going to walk to the village, Challoner! To *walk*! What for? I thought I understood——”

Then a murmur of undertones; then Overton's voice—— “I can send at once. I should have done so before.”

“Why, I'll go.” That was Teddy.

Matilda lost not another moment. “What is wrong? What is the matter?” she cried, with a sound almost of

terror in her tones: for long years afterwards she remembered that moment, as she had cause to remember it.

"Well, it is hard to say: really I do not know what to advise," replied Whewell, who, with the others, was standing on the door-step, in front of the brougham, in which Mrs Hanwell was already seated. "Of course, if Challoner thinks the bleeding is still going on, he ought to have it seen to at once. I am very sorry; I had hoped we had settled it. But certainly Challoner is right to speak out; and as you say we are going away from a doctor—that is actually in an opposite direction—Is there no way round?" he broke off suddenly; "could we not drive round?"

"I shall walk, and be there in no time," announced Challoner with gruff decision. "Can you give me a latch-key, Hanwell? That is all I want."

"Eight miles at the end of a long day's shooting!" cried the master of Endhill.

"My dear fellow, eight miles; what are eight miles?" And Robert found himself almost pushed into the carriage. "There—it's all right; don't keep Mrs Hanwell waiting."

"I can't allow it. Certainly you shall not go alone."

"Suppose I go with him," said Whewell, faintly.

There were further suggestions and assertions, and at length, "Suppose there are two fools instead of one, and suppose here's a third to bear them company, and I'm he," cried Teddy in the rear. "What a lark! Just wait till I get my boots on."

"You need not trouble; George is off by this time on the bay mare," said the quiet voice that was always listened to. "And," continued Lord Overton, "Mr Challoner must be good enough to accept a bed here for to-night; he will be attended to much sooner here than at Endhill, and it will save the doctor, and the doctor's nag, a long journey into the bargain."

When had Overton done it? How had he managed it?

He had not appeared on the scene at all; and although as a host he had been polite, and as a man concerned, he had only so far entered into the spirit of the thing: now all were surprised, and though relief was painted on the faces of Whewell and Hanwell, the discomfiture of the other two gentlemen was obvious. Challoner looked, and could not keep from looking annoyed, and Teddy refused to stop equipping himself: now that he was started, he must do something and go somewhere, and eagerly burst forth with a dozen plans.

"Do whatever you like," said his brother. "Take a walk in the rain if it pleases you—it will do no one any harm; but Mr Challoner remains here," laying a detaining hand on Challoner's arm. "All right, coachman! Look you up in the morning, Robert;" and against so wise and comfortable a conclusion no one could protest.

Terrible had been the internal qualm which had been experienced by Whewell as well as by Robert when Challoner's first proposal had been made.

Even the lesser evil of having to drive their patient to the village and back, before again getting into the road for Endhill—a clear two miles, if not three miles, extra—had been appalling; and yet, but for Lord Overton's promptitude, this must have been the end of it. They could not be thankful enough.

"Uncle Overton is so kind and thoughtful, once he really understands about things," observed Lotta. "He does not often bestir himself, but when he does—— I am so glad you had not to take that dreadful walk, either of you; I assure you I am."

So were they.

"And where would have been the good?" proceeded the lady, astutely; "Mr Challoner must have gone all

the same. It would have been no use for any one of you to have gone without Mr Challoner; and if he *had* to go, and no one else *had* to go—however, I am glad he had not to go, either: uncle Overton settled it in much the best way.” And in every aching joint and weary muscle, the other two felt that she was answered in the affirmative, and found no flaw in the argument.

“Come and sit down,” said Lord Overton, gently pushing his reluctant guest back into the deserted drawing-room once more. “Matilda, don’t you sit up unless you like. Challoner,—why, Challoner,” with a sudden cry, “why, its *pouring*! Good heaven! what shall we do?”

“This,” said Matilda.

Her face had paled, but it was not the pallor of inaction; in a second she had with her own hands and Teddy’s help torn off Challoner’s coat, and sprung upon his arm, feeling for the pulse above the elbow-joint, as before indicated by Whewell,—holding it, when found, with the grip of a wild cat.

“What are you doing?” said Overton, in a low voice. Poor fellow, he was frightened now.

“She is doing me a service,” replied Challoner for her; “Lady Matilda is pressing her fingers into the vein to stop the circulation, and if she can only hold on——”

“I can—I shall.”

“It is indeed kind;” but the speaker did not proceed. It *was* kind — no one could say it was not kind; but it was annoying and vexatious that he should need such kindness. It was difficult to know what to say where complaints would have been ungracious, but where too much gratitude would have been absurd. The situation had been forced upon his entertainers: nothing had been voluntary on their part, and this no one could have felt more keenly than the recipient, the

Challoner who had sat silent and still, left to himself the whole evening, uncared for and unnoticed. To be sure, Overton had drawn his chair up a few yards off, and Overton had been equally at leisure; but there the good-fellowship for the nonce had ended, while neither Teddy nor Matilda had done for him a thing. To have Teddy now passionately pacing up and down the room on his account! To have Matilda kneeling by his side!

He bit his lip, and quiet man as he was, almost cursed the situation in his heart.

However, there the situation was, and nothing could improve it: and ages indeed it seemed before the sharp imperative summons of the door-bell announced the welcome arrival—come, indeed, as soon as any reasonable mortals could have expected, and as fast as Dr Hitchin's horse could go; and all that weary while Matilda knelt bravely on, never changing her position, nor relaxing her hold, but taking no part in the brief dialogues that from time to time were interchanged among the other three, and only now and then drawing unconsciously a long deep breath, and stealing a furtive glance at the clock.

## CHAPTER XI.

### CHALLONER IS IMPATIENT TO BE GONE.

"The latent mischief from his heart to tear."

—PRIOR.

Under the skilful treatment of the village apothecary, a man of high repute in his own sphere, and renowned for many a long-winded diagnosis, Challoner's wound soon assumed a less serious aspect.

But another difficulty now arose. He was ordered to bed—not to bed for the night, as was reasonable enough, and agreeable enough to his inclinations, but to stay in bed until seen and interviewed the next day; and this could only be hearkened to with ridicule and impatient contempt. But what, then, was the dismay of the scoffer, and the delight and importance of our friend Teddy, when the command that had been thus wantonly maltreated when it issued from Dr Hitchin's lips, had to be obeyed from very stress of adverse circumstances! The next morning found Challoner hot and cold, coughing and shivering, and although still unwilling to own as much, by no means so obdurate as the night before. He would at least lie still for an hour or two: he had—yes, he certainly had taken a little chill; and perhaps, as the day was wet, and nothing could be done out of doors, being Sunday, he might as well submit to be coddled up, so as to be all right on Monday.

But Monday came, and he was by no means all right; throat and chest were sore, his head was aching, and he sneezed in the doctor's face even while making solemn declaration of his innocence. The truth was, that scarcely any living man could have escaped scot-free who had done what Challoner had done: he had stood—and without his coat, be it remembered—full in the icy current let in by the broken window for upwards of twenty minutes, while Whewell attended to his hand and wrist; and he had just come out of a well-warmed room, a rather over-warm room, into which no draught ever by any chance penetrated, and he had lost some blood. He could hardly have been human, and not have caught cold; and this was precisely what he had done.

He had caught cold—nothing more; but nothing more was needed. The cold had attacked both throat and chest, and there was no doubt about it. To get up and take his departure was not to be thought of;

he must give in, stop where he was, and play the invalid.

A more reluctant or pugnacious invalid Dr Hitchin had never before had to deal with.

What! stay on at Overton, and on and on at Overton, and that not for two days or three days, but "till he was better,"—horrible indefinite term!—obtrude himself in a manner so unseemly on strangers, utter strangers, and demand and wrench from them, as it were, their sympathy and their hospitality? Not he. It could not be done. The doctor must understand, once for all, that he, the patient, had got to be made well somehow in another day or so,—well enough, at any rate, to leave the Hall, and no longer trouble people upon whom he had no sort of claim, and to whose house he had merely come to dine by chance.

"Bless my life, surely it was a lucky chance then!" cried the amazed Hitchin in his heart. "One would think these were snug enough quarters for any dainty fellow to be laid up in: everything he can possibly want; fine old place, fine company—a nice amusing idle young fellow like Teddy, and the Earl is not half so black as he's painted. Ay, and Lady Matilda. And—Lady—Matilda," proceeded the old gentleman slowly. "Ah dear! times are changed with the young folks nowadays. What would I not have given twenty years ago for the chance of being nursed up and looked after by a Lady Matilda! A fine woman, a fine stately beauty of the rare old type—not the trumpery pretty miss, with a turned-up nose and freckles, who passes as a belle in these times. Lady Matilda *never* looks amiss; I have never seen her look amiss, at any rate, and I meet her out and about in all sorts of winds, and in all sorts of old clothes. What would the man have? What does it all mean? I can't enter his room, but he begins with his 'When shall I be up, doctor? Can't I go away to-morrow, doctor?'

plaguing my life out, and running, certainly running a very decided risk, by thus fretting and irritating the mucous membrane into the bargain. What is he up to, that Challoner?" suddenly cried the little sage, knitting his wiry brows; "he is either a deep one and has his own reasons—— Aha! Is it Lady Matilda after all, I wonder?"

But he kept a tight hand on the patient all the same.

Now we would not for a moment cast a slur on Hitchin, and it is not to be supposed that in the few remarks we feel called upon to make below, that we infer he was biassed by certain considerations in his view of the case—that he made the worst of the accident, and the most of his opportunity; but it ought to be borne in mind that, as a medical man—as *the* medical man of the neighbourhood, the sole physician, accoucheur, surgeon, and apothecary of anywhere about short of Scaburgh itself—he had been hardly used by the Overtons. Lady Matilda was never ill, neither were her brothers. Their rude health and hardihood braved every kind of weather, and laughed at every sort of disease; they were by circumstances placed above the reach of almost every form of infection; they could not be accused, even by their dearest friends, of overtaking their brains; and they did not know what nerves were. His only chance lay in an accident; and so far, accidents had been few and far between.

"Yet," pondered he, "they ride the most dangerous animals going." But then Dr Hitchin's ideas of a dangerous animal differed from those of Teddy and Matilda.

However, one thing was certain, that scarcely ever since the good doctor had established himself in those parts, had he been called in to attend any one at the Hall; and indeed, on the rare occasions when this privilege had been accorded him, and he and his Bobby had had the felicity of turning in at the avenue gate, it had been invariably on the behoof of a housemaid or kitchen-



maid whose ailment did not even necessitate his drawing rein at the front door. Even Lotta had got through her full share of childish complaints before his day, and nothing had remained for him but the dregs of the whooping-cough, which dregs had done him no credit, and given him considerable trouble.

He had not soon been summoned again; and indeed it was now several years since he had even been within the park, farther than to skirt along the high slope above the house, where was a road free to all, and used as a short cut by any one who chose.

All of this being thus explained, and it being also understood that Dr Hitchin knew tolerably well all the outs and ins of the family, and had, in common with the rest of the little world about, studied their ways and humours for a considerable length of time, the judicious reader will at once be able, according to the charity that in him—or her—lies, to determine how ill Challoner really was.

Very ill he was not, or he would have been more meek. And he was not meek—not by any means. True, he said but little, and gave utterance to not a syllable of complaint, but his air was restive and disdainful; he received instructions and prescriptions with a smile that was worse than words; and though he did not actually dare to disobey orders, though he put out his tongue when told, and even submitted to the indignity of having a glass tube thrust under it, and having to sit still with the ridiculous thing sticking out of his grave mouth for two full minutes, he did it all with what at least was no enthusiasm, and received the report of his stomach, his pulse, and his temperature as if they had severally belonged to some one else.

Such apathy was almost too much even for the cheerful little doctor; but there was one person whom it suited to a nicety—one member of the household who got on better with Challoner than he had ever done with any mortal in his life before—and that was Lord Overton.

Overton had found a man who could hold his tongue, and yet be happy.

He had at last by good hap hit upon a fellow-creature who would sit as still, smoke as long, and say as little as he did himself; he had at length met with some one who paid him no court, gave him no trouble, put forth no efforts for his amusement, no solicitude for his comfort, and who expected, in return for all this forbearance, this priceless moderation, simply nothing. When he had said his "Good morning," and "Hope you're better?" each day, he could sit down just where he liked, in the worst chair and the worst part of the room if he chose, and Challoner would barely turn his head to see where he was, or what he was doing. He would pull out his own cigar; he would hunt up his own match, and pass it on, no one resenting his rising and moving to do so; he would poke the fire—Robert Hanwell would have had his hair standing on end had he witnessed the indifference with which Challoner permitted his distinguished companion to handle his own poker and tongs, once he found that Overton liked doing so,—he would sit on and on in peace and comfort, no one thinking it necessary to trouble with talking beyond a "Beastly wet," now and then varied, perchance, with a "Bad for the farmers,"—each of which remarks, if originated by himself, would merely draw from the other an inarticulate civil sound, which was perfectly polite and pleasant, but which most men would have thought was hardly response sufficient for Lord Overton. Perhaps Challoner would volunteer the "Beastly wet," and Overton would nod the mute assent; perhaps they would both together originate the sentiment; perhaps one would see that the weather was about to improve, and the sky to clear, while the other considered that the rain was setting steadily in; perhaps one would narrate a brief, a very brief experience of country life, farmers shooting, or proprietary grievances; perhaps the other would cap the story

with a better,—but however long they bore each other company, and whatever they agreed upon or differed upon, one thing was plain, they were on the best of terms.

Lady Matilda jested about the strange pair who, thus thrown at haphazard together, fitted like a pair of gloves; and my lord's predilection for Mr Challoner, and the length of time my lord passed in the sick-room, made the invalid's beef-tea several degrees stronger and more grateful to the palate than it would have been had Mr Edward only been there to see.

Nobody told Lord Overton a word of Challoner's impatience to be at liberty—naturally nobody would; and indeed the principal person who could, was the least likely of all to whisper a hint of the kind, since Dr Hitchin knew better than to breed mischief at any time, especially such mischief as must have been detrimental to his own interests.

Greatly was he pleased with the alliance between the two odd-come-shorts. (It was Matilda who styled them the odd-come-shorts, and who stuck to the term in spite of Teddy's representation that whatever might be said of Overton, it was rough on Challoner to be bracketed with him, without being given a chance of showing what he was or what he could be.)

Lady Matilda openly smiled in the doctor's face when he announced that Lord Overton was excellent company for Mr Challoner. She was quite willing that he should be, more than willing—charmed, delighted; but it showed her one thing—namely this, that any one who could be thus enamoured of her dear excellent elder brother's dumb show of good-fellowship, could be of no earthly good to *her*: she must look elsewhere for a kindred spirit.

At length Dr Hitchin suffered himself to be persuaded into a decree that his patient might be moved into another room,—into the drawing-room, or still better,

into the sunny little boudoir—Lady Matilda's boudoir—which was on the same floor, and had a southern aspect.

No going up and down stairs at first, no draughts, no chills. "You just go to Lady Matilda's room by-and-by, when the windows are shut, and there is a good fire—that is to say, if her ladyship will be good enough to grant permission," with a little bow and wave of the hand to Teddy, who was supposed to represent his sister at any time she might be apart from him. "Ask Lady Matilda——"

Challoner lifted his head, as though about to speak.

"——My compliments to Lady Matilda," proceeded the good doctor, not noticing this, "and will she be charitable enough—eh? is that the phrase, eh?" smiling jovially,—“charitable enough to harbour this poor patient of mine for a few hours in her delightful haven of refuge, eh, sir? Hum, eh? Haven of refuge, eh? You will have drifted into as snug a haven of refuge as ever mariner did if you get taken in there, Mr Challoner, I can assure you. Ha! ha! ha! Good anchorage for any man. I remember the room well,” suddenly resuming a matter-of-fact tone, as the two unresponsive faces before him showed no appreciation of his slyness,—“I remember its aspect, and recommending it for Miss Lotta—Mrs Hanwell—after her severe attack of whooping-cough. She could not throw off the cough, and I was obliged to keep her almost entirely to her mother's boudoir. It was a charming convalescent home—convalescent home, I called it then, to amuse the little girl—and it appears it must do duty for a convalescent home once more, Mr Challoner. You will find it most comfortable: ladies always contrive to make a room comfortable; their little odds and ends, work-baskets, and knick-knacks, are all additions in their way. Lady Matilda must find you something to do, my good sir; you are tired of being idle, and that is what makes you fancy yourself so ill——”

"——I/ I fancy myself ill!"

"Well, yes; you have felt yourself uncommonly ill, no doubt," replied the shameless doctor, coolly; "very miserable, and feverish, and low, and that was the cause of your restless desire to get away from the Hall. Oh, I understood it all; you thought you were regularly in for it, and as you did not mean to lie up you would fain have set off through fog and rain to travel all over the country, until you had developed a thorough-paced fever. That was what you were up to. Oh, don't tell me—I know—I know; and let me tell *you*, my friend, that you had your desire as nearly as ever man had. I would not alarm any one at the time, but it has been a close shave—a very close shave; a little more would have done it—just as much more," turning to Teddy, "as Mr Challoner wanted to do. Ah, young men, young men!"

"Pooh!" said Challoner; but two things in the last speech softened his contempt. He liked—who does not?—to have it thought he had been ill; also he liked being called a young man.

He was not a very young man—he was just at the age when a man may be young or not; but Dr Hitchin, who revered muscle and sinew, height and breadth, a deep chest and a long arm, honestly looked his admiration, and could not comprehend the gleam of satisfaction which stole athwart Challoner's brow, where already a dash of grey had begun to mingle with the thick dark locks on the temple.

"Pooh!" said the poor fellow, but he smiled—for almost the first time that day he smiled; something in his own thoughts had pleased him as Hitchin spoke.

"No disrespect to Lord Overton or Mr Edward here," proceeded the doctor presently; "but you will be glad to vary your society a little. Lady Matilda—(what the mischief is the meaning of this now?" internally. "No sooner do I mention Lady Matilda than my gentleman

looks black as thunder at me. Her ladyship been snubbing him, eh? Can that be it, I wonder?) And, Mr Edward, get out a game of chess, or draughts, or something," he continued aloud; "backgammon, eh? or——"

"Penny Nap," cried Teddy, joyously.

"Cards? Ah, very good—very good. Anything to amuse the mind. We used to play cribbage in my young days."

"Matilda likes cribbage. I have to play with her; it's awfully slow, for she always beats me," said Teddy, with more interest than he had before displayed in the conversation. "I hate the counting, for she always manages to bag something from me, with all those 'fifteen twos' and rot. How is a fellow to remember that nine and six make fifteen, as well as seven and eight?"

"Are you fond of whist?" It was a great moment for Hitchin. Whist was his strong point, and to make a fourth in a rubber at the Hall, or even to play with a dummy—for Lady Matilda was probably no great hand—would have been——

"No, I hate it," said Teddy, flatly.

## CHAPTER XII.

### TEDDY'S CONFIDENCES.

"Each man has a measure of his own for everything."

—LAVATER.

"For fools will prate; and though they want the wit  
To find close faults, yet open blots they hit."

—DRYDEN.

Hope was over in a moment, killed in the birth, or rather it might have been almost said to have been still-

born, so few were its flickering seconds of existence. No whist-table in the library at the Hall, no Lord Overton for a partner, no reminiscences of the same for other ears on the morrow's rounds—it had been but a passing vision, gone like a flash, and now there was again only the useful Challoner to fall back upon.

"There must not be too much talking, remember," Hitchin sighed, all doctor again. "The bronchial tubes are still tender, and must not be excited. Talking irritates——"

"You need not be afraid of *his* talking," said Teddy, bluntly; "he must talk in his sleep if he talks at all. At any rate, he never favours me; Overton is the only person who gets any change out of him, and a little goes a long way with Overton. He ain't particular."

But the hand that fell on Challoner's shoulder was so hearty and kindly, and the charge was so freely and confidently laid, and no one could have taken umbrage at it, and no one did. It was impossible not to like Teddy Lessingham when Teddy was good; and when he was not, why, then Matilda argued it was "only Teddy," only her poor beautiful whimsical—she would not for the world have whispered "half-witted"—brother. He was, she would have maintained, perfectly sensible, perfectly rational, perfectly all that he should have been, when he was not vexed or sullen; it was only when thwarted or distressed, when he did not understand, and took things amiss, and was grieved and indignant, that Teddy was irresponsible: it was other people who roused the evil spirit in him; Teddy, let alone, would not have hurt a fly.

And Teddy now quite looked upon himself as Challoner's friend. Overton was all very well, but Overton went for nothing beside two men of the world such as himself and Challoner: it was to him that Challoner must look for everything that could make his enforced stay at the Hall endurable; and accordingly, "Well, now," cried

he, as the doctor left the room—"now, you see, there you are! I said you would be all right in a few days if you would only hold on; and so you *are* all right—right as a trivet; and it is just a week to-day since—since last Saturday. This is Saturday again, you know. I daresay you didn't know, for there was nothing to tell you, unless it was the newspaper, and *that* says Friday, for to-day's has not come yet, though the afternoon post will be here directly. I say, will you go to Matilda's boudoir now, or after a bit?"

"Oh, wait a little," said Challoner, slowly.

"All right. But I'll tell her that you are coming, and that she is to have a good fire, and all the rest of it; I can just run along now."

"Oh—ah—don't be in a hurry," said Challoner, with an evident wish to detain the steps which had already begun to move to the door.

"Is there not—any other room?" he began, hesitatingly.

"Oh, by Jove! when you heard what Hitchin said, and all the dust he raised about it! Oh, I say, that's too bad. There's the billiard-room, of course, but it would be as much as my place is worth——no, no, I never disobey orders; if I did, Matilda would give it me—that she would, I can tell you."

"But—we shall disturb her, shan't we?"

"Not a bit. Disturb Matilda! She is never disturbed. What has she got to be disturbed about? Lotta was the one who used to complain of being 'disturbed.' I am sure I don't know why, no one ever wanted to disturb *her*; she might have been let alone from morning to night, for all the good she was to anybody."

"I am such a nuisance." And something else was added indistinctly.

"Oh, come, I like that," said Teddy. "When I have told you over and over again what a perfect godsend you are to us all, and me particularly! For I never have



anybody hardly—I mean any young fellows like myself. I don't know how it is, I am sure," with Teddy's puzzled look, that always made Matilda change the subject,—“I don't know how I don't have more fellows about. I had lots of friends once—I mean I have now, any number; but they don't come here. We don't ask them here; we forget, I suppose. A fellow can't be expected to remember everything, you know,” he concluded, with his usual apology.

“No, of course not,” said Challoner, dreamily. He had been thinking his own thoughts, and they had been of a nature to make him say “No” or “Yes” at random to any sudden call. He had added “Of course not” from mere absence of mind; and as it appeared to suit the requirements of the case, he again relapsed into silence, and his companion again resumed: “Overton is as fond of you as he can be; and we were saying only this morning what a grand thing it was that Robert had not carried you off to Endhill, as he had all but done, and had you ill there. How you would have hated it! Oh, you don't know how you would have hated it!” cried Teddy from his heart. “You would have had nobody but Robert and Whewell. Whewell would not have done much for you. He is a selfish beggar; I can see he is. I don't like him a bit. He made me kneel on the cold bit of pavement, when I had to be godfather—I mean proxy godfather, or whatever it is—at the christening, and he had a nice piece of carpet. It was my carpet by rights, but he edged on to it, and I had to go on to the horrid cold stone. It was just like him: I knew he was that kind of fellow the moment I set eyes upon him. Then he comes here dangling after Matilda!”

“Does he?” said Challoner, and suddenly looked as though expecting more.

“Doesn't he, that's all! Every day this week but one, and to-day,—and he'll be over to-day yet. It's only four

now ; he'll be here about five. He has been, let me see—he did not come one day ; that was Wednesday, and that was because we went there, so that ought not to count ; and it is as if he had been every day, every single day, this week."

"But he has only been twice up to see me."

"Very likely—up to see you. The first two times he would not disturb you—not for the world, as the doctor said you were to be quiet,—Hitchin did say so, you know, though I don't believe Whewell knew it ; and then Wednesday—that was the 'bye' : and then yesterday and the day before he was up both times. Well, but just fancy what it would have been for you to have been ill at Endhill," he started off on another tack ; "just think now. We should have come over to inquire after you, of course,—most likely we should have come over every day, as we have nothing else to do at present,—and of course we, at least I, should have come up and sat up with you a bit ; but still it would have been different. And then all the rest of the time you would have had only Robert—only Robert," in a voice whose cadence spoke volumes. "And there you would have been, and we here,—and we who would have been so thankful of you——"

"——It is really—you are too good," said Challoner, with a sudden movement. "Go on," he added, in rather a low voice. "What were you saying?"

"I am sure I don't know. Oh, how glad we are you are here ! We should have been fit to hang ourselves these five dripping days if it hadn't been for you ; for though we get on as well as most people in the wet—we don't mind it much, you know,—still it is nasty to get rained through and through every day, and never to meet anybody out but ourselves," said Teddy, lucidly if ungrammatically. "Matilda is the worst off ; but then, if she likes Whewell, she is welcome to him. All the same," he added, after a few minutes' reflection, "I do think she

has had enough of him by this time. She cut out at the back door like anything when she caught sight of him coming up the avenue yesterday; and that was how you had so much of his company: by the way, he was hanging on till she came in, and she never came. It was rather a joke, that."

"He has no business to come over bothering us," he broke out, presently. "We don't want him: he is not *our* friend; he did not come on *our* invitation——"

"——Neither did I," said Challoner, with rather a bitter smile.

"You! Oh! Oh, that's too bad of you!" cried poor Teddy, reddening in his anxiety to retrieve so obvious an error. "Well, anyway you *are* our friend now,—at least if you will be friends with us," he added, in his best and nicest manner. "People don't seem to care much to be friends with Overton and me," oblivious of the numbers he had just before boasted; "they don't take to us much, I am afraid. But we are not so bad at all when you get to know us. At least *I* am not so bad," said Teddy, very simply. "Overton," with warmth,—"*Overton* is as good a fellow as ever lived; and so is *Matilda*."

"She is—what?"

"Never mind; don't catch one up, I say. I only meant to tell you that you need not be afraid of her. People are afraid of her, you know; they say she is spiteful, and that. It is the greatest lie. There's no spitefulness in her; she only lets her tongue run on a bit. Overton and I are always telling her of it; but we can't help laughing, she does take people off so jolly well sometimes. She means no harm: she is awfully good to you when she likes you. She can't like everybody; she is too clever to like everybody—that's the worst of her; and there are people, you know,—she says Robert sets her teeth on edge," he broke off suddenly.

Challoner laughed.

"Ah, but it's true," proceeded the naughty boy, quite aware that he was telling tales; "he is such a fool, he never knows when he is in a hole, and goes on and on till she can't stand more. Then she lets out on him; how can she help it? It is his fault; he ought to keep out of her way."

"But he cannot always keep out of her way."

"Oh yes, he could. Why not? Nobody wants him."

"That may be, but still——"

"Oh, I know what you mean: it is what she says herself; she has got to put up with him for Lotta's sake. Women are so soft, you know. You would not think Matilda was soft like that, but she is. It is queer, but she does not mind Lotta half so much as Robert. Now *I* think there is six to one and half-a-dozen to the other. Lotta is as like all the Wilmots as she can be; they have all those flat faces and sleepy eyes. You would never dream she was Matilda's daughter, would you? Matilda is like us," said Teddy, looking very handsome and conscious.

"She is."

"You see it?"

"Like you? Yes."

"But not like Overton?"

"Not in the least like Lord Overton."

"I wonder what you think of Matilda," said Teddy, after a pause, and several wistful glances. "I am afraid she behaved very badly to you the other night. I am sure I don't know—that is to say—you see, it was all a bit of temper," proceeded he, in the humour to be chatty and confidential, for the hour was seductive, the sick-room warm and bright, the day without dark and dismal, and moreover, he had just come in from a long wet ride, had changed his things and got comfortable again; and with his arm-chair on one side of the fireplace, and Challoner's on the other, to be cosy and communicative seemed quite the right thing.

"It was only Matilda's way of showing fight because Robert gave himself airs. Of course it was not fair; but then women never do fight fair, and there's no driving the notion into their heads. When Matilda wants to serve Robert out somehow, she don't care a hang how; and so, because Robert looked daggers at her for not taking more notice of you before—oh, you know what I mean," a little uneasy, now that he got so far, and no helping hand was held out to draw him to land, as was sure to be the case if Matilda were by and saw him in difficulties. "You know well enough my sister was stiff, and cold, and—and infernally disagreeable to you, both at Endhill and when you dined here; at any rate, here. At Endhill, of course, she had nothing to do with you; but then, of course, she should have had, and she would have had too, if she had chosen. But it was the night you all came over, that she was the worst. I was quite ashamed; it seemed so inhospitable altogether. And how were you to know? It was not meant for *you* at all; it would have been the same whoever had come—I mean she would have been the same to any friend of Robert's—that's to say—well, of course, there was Whewell," he murmured, and his voice fell.

"I have nothing to complain of, I am sure," replied Challoner, with the courtesy of a Grandson, but with something also of the coldness. "Lady Matilda has surely a right to choose whom she will honour by her——"

"——Oh, fiddlesticks! Honour! There was no honour about it. Whewell got her ear, and so she let him talk on; and if Robert had taken no notice, she would have been as sick of him then as she is now, but Robert's putting in his oar just did all the mischief. When Robert tries to force Matilda to do a thing—no matter whether she wants to do it or not—it is just as if she had put out her two fore-feet like our donkey mare, and she'd stand still till Christmas before she'd budge a step."

"Your sister——" said Challoner, and then stopped. He had not relaxed a line in his face, nor made as though he heard the simile so little flattering and so truly fraternal. "Your sister——" he said; then began again—"I owe Lady Matilda a great debt of gratitude for her kindness and patience the other night. Probably she did me a valuable service, and I am sure it was neither an easy nor an agreeable one."

"Oh—ah—yes. Yes, of course. I had forgotten Matilda held your arm. But any one could have done that. However, she meant it for civility, no doubt; and that just shows how right I was about it all. Robert and Lotta had gone home by that time, you see. They had taken themselves off before we went back to the drawing-room; and so, when there was no one there to see, and your hand was bad again, Matilda was glad enough to be of use. Oh, I know she was: she is awfully good if people are ill, or hurt, or anything; but she wouldn't have touched you with a hot poker if Robert had been by—I can tell you that, Challoner."

Again Challoner laughed aloud: he began to find Teddy Lessingham downright amusing.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### WHEWELL ENCROACHES.

"They that are rich in words must needs discover  
They are but poor in that which makes a lover."

—RALEIGH.

Without any suspicion of the base revelations that were thus being made within a few feet of her own door, Matilda sat awaiting her brother's return from the sick-

room, whether she had seen him turn in an hour before, and from which he seemed in no hurry to emerge.

Matilda was not in her usual spirits.

She was a little uneasy, a little anxious and remorseful, and in consequence just a little cross. Whewell had been rather much for her. She had laid her little hands upon him—had laid them for a moment; had meant to trifle away a sunny hour, and no more,—and he had seized the moment in grim earnest, and expected the hour to expand into a lifetime. He had encroached; he had—yes, he certainly had shown desire for more than had ever been intended, more than he would ever get. If he could only have been content to have taken the welcome accorded him as he ought to have taken it—to have enjoyed Lord Overton's hospitality, shot his pheasants, admired his sister, and then respectfully made his bow, and taken himself off,—how much better it would have been! But here he was still, and every day lessened his charms.

He would not remain at Endhill, although it was to Endhill alone he had been first invited. Endhill now found no favour in his eyes: he would appear and re-appear at Overton; morning, noon, and night at Overton—one excuse or other serving his turn as it offered; but always expecting to be met with open arms, to be made much of, entertained, asked, and pressed to stay on,—and never, as it seemed, for an instant suspecting that it would have been better to stay away.

Lady Matilda's own sitting-room had not been safe from his intrusion since she had imprudently laid its existence bare to him on the first occasion of his looking in for an afternoon call. He had not begun to lose caste then, and she had little dreamed how soon he would do so, even when he had vowed, with delighted eyes, that he would know the way back thither. Too speedily had he made use of his knowledge: the very next afternoon had seen him tapping at the door; and such precipitation had

even then made her vexed with herself, while she had repented more and more when Monday's and Tuesday's visits had been followed by Thursday's and Friday's, and Wednesday had only been a "bye" because the brother and sister had been at Endhill.

Now Matilda would not have had any one know it for the world, but the real reason of their going to Endhill—the real object which had taken them thither—had been to put a stop to Whewell's notion that he was to be at Overton every day of the week.

He had been known to be going shooting, and to be going shooting near the Hall,—quite close up to the house, in fact; and as such an arrangement infallibly meant that he must be asked, or ought to be asked in, or that he would come in without asking, Matilda, quick as thought, had taken occasion when the plans were being made, and when Whewell himself was standing at her elbow, to send a message to her daughter through Robert, the only other person present, to the effect that she would ride over to the cottage in the course of the afternoon. She had even done more—she had added, somewhat emphatically, a playful codicil, announcing that her visit was to her grandson, and that she therefore hoped the grandson would be visible, and would be glad to see his dear grandmother. Alas! some one else had been also visible, and very glad to see the dear grandmother. Whewell had noted the riders pass, and had left his sport on the instant to fly at the higher game; and this from a sportsman was enough: he could not more effectually have shown his hand.

He had meant to show it: it had seemed to him time to show it; for the bold barrister had done more than merely fall in love with Lady Matilda, enough as that might have seemed for a four days' acquaintance,—he had fully made up his mind to become her suitor—and more, her husband. He had thought it all over; the



birth and the jointure, as well as the beauty and the wit; and this was the result: he felt himself to be a lucky man—a very lucky man.

It would have been well for him to have looked into his luck a little more closely; it would have saved him much disappointment, a little pain, and a lifelong bitterness,—and it would have saved Lotta a week's heavy house-books. For, with so fair a prize to win, and so much depending on the use he made of his present opportunity, it was not to be expected that Whewell should be in a hurry to go, even though the entreaties of host and hostess waned in urgency, and though the courses at dinner were perceptibly curtailed as the week went by.

What cared he for courses, his head running on Matilda? He wanted nothing of Endhill, nothing but bare house-room—and not even that, would Lord Overton only have been a little less obtuse. Had he had his will, he would have been at one place, one all-engrossing place, from morning till night; and indeed, so confident was he that it only needed a few decisive strokes to carry the day, that he could scarcely understand how it came about that no chance of giving these seemed forthcoming. He thought the Overton brothers needed a jog on the elbow; and accordingly one afternoon, when matters were thus at a standstill, he made his way over early, but not too early—not early enough to be put off with luncheon by the innocent Teddy, nor to place in an awkward predicament his sister. By arriving shortly after four on an ungenial day, he could spin out the time till a hope that he would stop dinner should drop out naturally; then a messenger could fetch his portmanteau in a trice, and all would be happily arranged. If Lord Overton or any one else should suggest, "Take a bed here," very well; there would be no need for saying "No." He had been prepared for anything, would agree to everything, and confidently hoped the best.

But the visit went on, and there was no word about sending for the portmanteau, and at length he was fain to jump up, watch in hand, and be amazed at the lateness of the hour, and vow he must fly like the wind to be in time for Mrs Hanwell's very unfortunately primitive dinner-hour. He declared he had forgotten dinner altogether. Did Lady Matilda think he could possibly walk over in three-quarters of an hour, and would her daughter be terribly severe were he a little late? He was really terrified, he would not stop a single second longer.

"I'll see you back in my T-cart," announced Teddy, with a very fair show of obligingness, considering that he was inwardly raging against his sovereign lady, who had bound him over to do so sorely against his will, and, as he had told her, against his conscience also, "For you know the lies I shall have to tell if I do," he had said; "and it's too bad of you to make me tell lies when there's no need for them." But she had been inexorable: he was to drive Mr Whewell back, and it was all nonsense about the lies; he was simply to *do* it—there was no lie in that; whether he liked doing it or not, was his own affair.

The argument had not closed when Whewell himself had appeared on the scene, and he now interposed eagerly, for he thought he saw daylight somewhere: "No, really; I could not think of your troubling yourself."

"Oh, no trouble; I should enjoy it of all things," said Teddy, with a look of dreadful exultation at his sister "There is nothing I like more than a drive in the wet." Another look. "And hark to the rain now! It's pouring cats and dogs!"

Here Whewell stole a glance at Matilda also. "Oh, if you *like* it," he responded dolefully; "there is no accounting for tastes. But I confess I am not a fish or a duck. However, it is my own fault for not being off sooner. I——"

"No hurry. I'll tool you over in twenty minutes or so. The T-cart, Charles," to the footman. "Tell them to look sharp. I let them know it would be wanted some little time ago." Then, in answer to a warning expression on his sister's brow, "I should have gone out anyway, Whewell," he concluded, thus in his own mind serving Matilda right. She had now made him tell three lies, if not four, and he had thus shown her that he was the one who knew best, and that the thing could not have been done without.

But even with the ordering of the T-cart, and the bustle of getting ready for it, had come no opening to Whewell for a quiet word with his hostess. Teddy had not been allowed to leave the room even to put on his coat and get his gloves and hat, without showing the visitor out first; and even in pressing the lady's hand as his adieux were being made, he had been unable to convey any sentiments, since she had chosen the moment, the very moment, when his fingers touched hers, to give directions about posting a letter. Her "Good-bye" to him, and her "Don't forget" to her brother, had been spoken in a breath.

Then Friday's attempt had been still more of a failure. Lady Matilda had not only been out, but had remained out, and he had not seen her at all; and although he could not, of course, be sure that it had been done on purpose to avoid him, and though he had refused to feel hurt and annoyed, or to take the matter as having any serious aspect, yet he had been unable to forget that he had distinctly promised he would himself bring over from Endhill some expected documents for Challoner, and had named the time at which he would appear. On Friday night he had begun to think that he should not have quite so easy a path to tread as he had at first anticipated.

Lady Matilda, on her part, hoped that she had shown the man his place.

She had desired to do it gently. She still liked Whewell, and liked to be liked by him; and would he now go, would he only vanish from the scene while there was yet peace and goodwill between them, and while no words had passed which could cause regret or unpleasantness in the future, he should be at once reinstated in her good graces, and all presumption should be condoned and forgotten. Oh, if he would only go; if anything she could say or do would make him understand; if Robert would but exert himself to shake off his friend; if Overton, of his own accord and without being prompted, would but withhold the shooting! Oh, if they would but see, tiresome ignorant stupids that they were! They had not an eye among them.

All this she said to herself twenty times a-day, and she had no one else to say it to. No one helped her, no one comforted her; and accordingly it was with a somewhat sombre brow, and a little droop at the corners of her mouth, that Lady Matilda sat by the fire that wet afternoon, deserted even by her faithful Teddy, ruefully wondering what was to happen next—whether she must actually quarrel with Whewell,—and, to pry still more closely into the secrets of her foolish heart, it must be owned that there lurked down in its depths all a woman's unquenchable desire to stand well with a lover to the last,—whether she must throw him off in the end, and say, "Mr Whewell," in the most awe-administering tones she could muster, or whether——

The door opened, and she started to her feet, with difficulty suppressing a cry.

It was only Challoner, and the parted lips melted into a smile.

Only Challoner! And who and what was he? It mattered little what he was: he was not Whewell, and that was enough.

The relief was such, that the warmest of welcomes was

scarcely warm enough to the speaker's mind. She could almost have kissed the rough hand she held, in gratitude for its owner's being merely himself and no one else. With him, all at once, she felt she had no fault to find: he stood before her in his integrity, and nothing could be laid to his charge; no languishing gleam from his eye had ever had to be avoided—no forward, too forward movement to be repressed; with him she was safe—on him she could still dare to shine. It was a dangerous rebound.

And undoubtedly it caused surprise in the minds of the ignorant pair. Teddy, indeed, had had his own ideas as to the reception his friend was likely to meet with, and he had looked deprecatingly into Matilda's face, and had hidden behind Challoner's broad back as the door opened; while Challoner himself had, if the truth were told, hung his head like a child, and slouched like a criminal. By common consent both had stolen along the passage without opening their lips, and they had striven to turn the door-handle noiselessly and advanced inoffensively, and then—what was this? Instead of being met by majesty in arms, an angel beamed forgiveness!

It was not an angel that whispered in Jem Challoner's ear at that moment.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### TEMPTED BY OPPORTUNITY.

"Opportunity creates a sinner: at least it calls him into action, and, like the warming sun, invites the sleeping serpent from his hole."—OWEN FELTHAM.

We left Teddy Lessingham and his sick friend on the threshold of Lady Matilda's own snug little sitting-room, the recipients of a warm and unexpected welcome.

The two great big unmannerly fellows stood agape at

the extent of their good fortune, and it was Matilda herself who pushed round the arm-chair for Mr Challoner to sit in; it was her hands which piled up the wood-fire, and placed a screen in front of the invalid; while at the same time questions, condolences, and congratulations fell musically upon his ear.

Teddy's spirits rose on the instant. "This is jolly," he said; "I do hope we shall have no one else come in; Robert or anybody; I expect it is too bad for other people. Hitchin was right about your not going down-stairs, Challoner—it is much pleasanter here; even when it rains there is always something to look at from this window; and I don't know how it is, but I do like small rooms better than large ones. Now, Challoner, don't you?"

"An unfair question." It was his sister who answered. "A shabby, impertinent, home-thrusting question, and not to be repeated. Mr Challoner being in my room, and in my *small* room, shall not be called upon to prefer it to any other. I will not have him so ill treated. He has been wounded in our service,—oh yes, that was certainly the case,—wounded, and is now in hospital, or, as seamen say, in dock for repairs. He is to be repaired under careful supervision; he is to be tenderly dealt with; Teddy shall not——"

"I'm as good to him as ever I can be!" cried Teddy, staring.

The next point was, did Mr Challoner feel quite warm? Did he feel any draught?

He felt no draught, he felt a delicious sense of luxury in mind and body, he felt that he was yielding to a spell which had already begun to work, and against which he could no longer struggle; and he felt that, come what might, for good or for evil, he would not now be anywhere else for the world.

He might be a fool? He would be a fool, then. He might be worse? Worse, then: so be it.

He had not of his own accord come to this enchanted spot, and stepped within the magic circle, but he had been brought thither against his will, by a fate which, so he told himself, had been too powerful for him,—so now he would have it out with fate, and see which was the winner in the game; he would not again try to escape, but he himself would dare himself, and dare the worst himself could do.

Throughout the past week he had been casting about in his mind how to evade this moment. He had never meant to see Matilda again, should he once turn his back on the grim walls of Overton Hall; he had seen once, and it had been enough; ever since the night on which she had knelt by his side, clasping her hands upon his arm, with her lovely, weary, patient face turned from him, and her ringing voice silent to him, and no smiles for him, and no eyes for him, he had never had her image far from his fancy. He told himself that he had escaped by the skin of his teeth. That had he been in Whewell's place—the favoured Whewell's place—he had fallen a victim far, far more mortally wounded than Whewell had been. Whewell? Pah! How could he, or such as he, appreciate a Matilda?

And Matilda's fair form night and day, sometimes beautiful and gracious, sometimes frowning and scornful, but mingled ever with that of another, had run through and through, and twisted subtly in and out of every feverish vision—Matilda, always Matilda,—and always Matilda beheld with love, distress, and shame.

If he had only gone while those feelings prevailed! If only that miserable doctor had not been suffered to interfere and bar the door with his preposterous dictums! Tempting a man who was doing what he could to escape from temptation; drawing back a man into the flames who was flying from fire!

Well, it was all over now; it was at an end now; it

was of no use looking back and lamenting over what might have been. He would stand aloof no longer; the gods were against it: here he was, fast bound, losing not a note of the soft voice, a fall of the dark eyelash, a turn of the graceful head; here he was, drinking in with every sense the draught that should have been to him a deadly poison, breathing the fumes of the intoxicating cup, bending over it, clasping it in his arms,—here he was, and here he would remain; he had thrown up the contest for the nonce, overpowered.

And this was the unobserving, indiscriminating, passive, stony Challoner: this the discreet friend; the uninteresting and uninterested man; the over-modest stranger, who now stood in such excellent contrast to the over-bold one. No, my lady, you are the very least bit out in your calculations this time. Talk away; it is all very nice and simple, isn't it? Mr Whewell may come now if he chooses, may he not? Whewell is the person to be thought about; Whewell has to be cold-shouldered unfortunately; and Whewell should have known better, and he is a troublesome fellow, and must be got rid of: but poor Mr Challoner, who is so good and so cold, and who has been so very, very badly used, he shall see now that Matilda can own herself in the wrong, and is not ashamed to show it.

And she does show it, and she has never shown to greater advantage in her life.

"If only those *Endhills* will stop away now," inwardly comments Teddy, observant and delighted. "If only this hurricane will keep up and blow them all in at their own door, should they ever attempt to come out of it! Challoner gets on first-rate with Matilda to-day; how they are talking! That chap can talk, I see, when he chooses. We shall have them quite good friends directly, and then he can stay on as long as he likes."

Meantime his sister's thoughts ran thus: "Well, now



I see the man, he is not at all disagreeably ugly. His eyes are grey and soft; I rather like them; they do not look very clever or penetrating—but then we cannot all be clever and penetrating. They look nice good quiet eyes,—not suggestive, perhaps, not capable of a vast amount of damage, but very well in their way; quite up to the rest of the face, in fact.”

The rest of the face was nothing much to boast of: skin, dark-red and sunburnt; nose, hard and a little crooked; mouth, large, steady, and slightly drawn down at the corners; the mild and pensive expression of the whole just dashed by a certain squareness and ruggedness of the chin, which seemed out of harmony if one had time to think about it, but which was usually overlooked by the people who characterised Mr Challoner as a quiet-looking man.

He had neither moustache, beard, nor whiskers, although his hair, which was of no particular shade of dusky colour, grew so closely round the temples that it suggested these would have been easily forthcoming, and would have been good of their kind. The head was well shapen, and well set on a pair of magnificent shoulders.

All of this was for the first time manifest to Lady Matilda. Until now she had seen Challoner without seeing him; she had been conscious of a lay figure somewhere behind other people, of a dim outline tall enough and broad enough to block up half the window at End-hill, and of a somewhat coarse, and, as she had then fancied it, stolid visage, now and then coming into the focus when she had looked at random up and down the table on the occasion of her last dinner-party. Afterwards she had contemplated the face with a shudder, when her own excited imagination had run riot over the accident, and that had been all; to the real Challoner not a moment's attention had been given.

Now, however, he was to be treated differently. “See,”

said the hostess, pointing to a piece of needlework on an antique screen in front of her,—“see, Mr Challoner, I must tell you the story of this. This is a fine piece of old tapestry, worked, it is said, by one of my very greatest of great-grandmothers. Good lady, she must have had little time for anything else, if all the work in this house wherewith she is accredited, really and truly was done by her. Now, look at this piece. These are Moors: here sits the Moorish king among his beauties; that one is the favourite, or has been the favourite, so far, but you see he now turns from her and bestows his royal attention elsewhere, on this damsel with the musical instrument in her hand, which he is pointing to as he presses her to play and sing. She is willing enough, I should say, smiling and nodding her consent; but the other, the neglected fair one, is very much put out indeed, and a fit of the sulks is to my mind inevitable. What do you think? Am I right? Is his Moorish majesty to have a bad time of it; or will the lady pocket her affront, and be content to play when she is asked in her turn, but to play—second fiddle?”

“An awkward position certainly, Lady Matilda.” Challoner looked calmly in the speaker’s face. “A bad business. The king should—should have managed better.”

“Oh, poor man, that is being too severe! ‘How happy could he be with either!’ you know; but that is what a man never does know, and never will learn. A woman is different; she is less exorbitant, less exacting. One lover, that is to say, one whole lover, one lover all to herself, suffices her. Of course she does not like to share him—witness this scene,” nodding to the picture; “but then that is only fair. Who would have an eye or an ear of a man with two eyes and two ears?”

“You think she should have all or nothing.”

“Precisely; all or nothing.”

“Yet, Lady Matilda, half a loaf is better than no bread.”

"Better, indeed! What a base idea, Mr Challoner! Half such a loaf as that too," indicating the luckless Moor. "No, indeed; the fair one is not so simple as to content herself with a paltry share, and no more would any true woman."

"*You* would not, I bet," said Teddy, finding at last something to understand in all this. "I pity the poor beggar who tries it on with you."

"We are not talking of me, dear; we are talking about pictures, or rather about this trumpery imitation of one," yawned his sister, pushing back the screen. "There, Moor, retire to oblivion." But Teddy had been cogitating as she spoke.

"It's all very fine for Matilda to talk," observed he now to Challoner; "she pretends to be down on other women, but she wouldn't like it herself. She can't stand anybody interfering with her——"

"——My dear boy, take your elbows out of my lap," impatiently.

"And if a fellow made up to her and to any one else at the same time," proceeded Teddy, doggedly bent on a hearing——

"——Nonsense!" cried Matilda, with a frown.

"Oh, it's very well to say 'nonsense,' but the very devil's in you,—oh, I say, you are not going?"

She was, with tears in her eyes; but they brought her back, and placed her again between them, and Teddy knelt at her feet, and Challoner begged for forgiveness as though he too had offended, and the ruffled brow smoothed again, and the burning cheek cooled as the afternoon wore on, and seemed only to wear too fast away. But it was curious that the trifling episode was destined never altogether to pass from the minds of two of those present.

## CHAPTER XV.

## HOPING STILL.

"There are none so blind as those that will not see."

Wind and rain could not continue for ever, so that although there was no abatement of the blast which still howled and moaned among the ocean cliffs, and whistled over the bare unprotected downs above, there was on the following day a decided cessation of the torrents which had hitherto poured down as it had seemed from exhaustless fountains.

Towards afternoon, indeed, the clouds ceased to empty themselves at all, and scurried harmlessly across the sky, leaving here and there openings through which gleams of pale sunlight stole; and thus it came to pass that, after repeated tappings of the barometer, and investigations from the front door, Mr Frank Whewell at length found himself in a position to point out that there was nothing to prevent any one—any one, at least, with thick boots and a greatcoat—from indulging in a good walk. A good walk would do them both good—the "both" referring to his friend Hanwell and himself, and the "good walk" being of course to Overton Hall.

As the weather had really improved, and as nothing could be brought forward on the other hand, host and hostess were graciously pleased to approve the proposal—Robert not unwilling himself to escape from four walls and Sunday magazines, and Lotta to hear what was going on at the other house.

Moreover, she affirmed that as nothing had been heard of Mr Challoner for a whole day, and as he was still *their* guest, though detained by misfortune elsewhere, it would be only right to look after his welfare. To have gone the

day before, that frightful day, would have been foolish,—it would have been more, an unnecessary attention, since Mr Whewell had called at Overton on the Friday, and had sat an hour in Mr Challoner's room ; but as no one had gone yesterday, and as no messenger had come over from the Hall either, she must own she thought it a good arrangement for the two gentlemen to walk thither now, inquire after the invalid, and find out when he would be able to return to Endhill. Return to Endhill he certainly must, to complete his visit.

Mr Whewell joyfully undertook to satisfy her, both as friend and hostess. He had been in his own mind bitterly indignant with Lotta all the evening before, considering that to her more than to Robert he owed it that he had been prevented going to Lord Overton's as usual : Lotta had stood out against all his representations and entreaties, had assured him she had no anxiety for tidings, and no desire to send messages ; and he had not been able even to make her see that her mother and uncles would expect him.

She had been sure that they would not expect him, and had, indeed, told her husband apart that what would be said would be this, that they were unable to amuse their own guest for a single day, and that he had been driven to Overton from sheer dearth of entertainment at home. This had touched Robert's weakest part, and he too had strenuously set himself against the going, so that a dull and sullen evening had been spent, and an equally uncongenial morning had followed, until the first lucky break in the clouds had induced the resolute barrister to make his proposition afresh. It had been met amiably, and he was at once restored to good-humour.

He was now anxious to wipe out of everybody's recollection the fact that he had previously been annoyed and had shown his annoyance ; and so well did he succeed, and so entirely was peace restored, that Mrs Hanwell

sent her love twice over, and begged Mr Whewell to remember to tell her mother that she would *not* be at home on Wednesday, and *would* be at home on Thursday, should Lady Matilda say anything about coming over.

All smooth behind : now forward ; now for Overton.

"And what did you do with yourselves yesterday ? How did you pass the time yesterday ?" he began with animation, the first greetings past. "We had a miserable day of it," aside to Lady Matilda. "You pitied us, I hope ? Our only consolation was, that you were pitying us, as we were you ; we were in sympathy, at all events. But how wretched it was ! Hanwell and I had had enough of each other hours before dinner-time ; and I am sure Mrs Hanwell wished us both anywhere else. Had it rested with me," lower still, "had it been left to me, I need hardly say where I should have been."

"Back in London, of course," rejoined she, easily ; "back in your dear Pall Mall and Piccadilly. No one blames you," as he looked denial ; "no one expects anything else. London people can scarcely be supposed to enter into the delights of a really wet day in the country ; I do not mean a half-and-half wet day, when it rains and clears and rains again, but a perfectly hopeless, eventless, dead-and-buried wet day, without the chance of a visitor, or the sound of the door-bell——"

"I know—I know. But," said Whewell, delighted, "your door-bell would have rung once at least yesterday, if I had had my will. I protested as much as I could ; I did indeed. And could I have,—I mean, would Mr and Mrs Hanwell have allowed it, I should have been in the body where I already was in the spirit—here."

"Here ? Oh no. We never"—Lady Matilda opened her eyes, and drew herself up ever so slightly—"never expected any of you. Had you come here, you would have wished yourself back again, I assure you. You like lively doings, and there was nothing going on here—

nothing amusing to bring you. We did not even go into the billiard-room; we just sat round the fire and talked."

"And yawned in each other's faces."

"Yawned? Well, no; I do not think we did yawn; I have no recollection of yawning."

"You were not so ill-mannered: you only wished you could have taken the liberty, instead of taking it; you said as we did, 'When, oh when will it be—dinner-time?'"

"I doubt if we made the remark," said Matilda, drily.

"Challoner is all right again, I see," continued her companion, after a momentary pause. "Is this—I presume this is his first appearance down-stairs?"

"Down-stairs; yes. He sat in the boudoir yesterday; the doctor thought he ought not to go down-stairs, the day was so bad."

"For fear of a chill, you know. In a large house like this there are so many passages," responded Whewell, conversant with everything; "where you have so many passages there must be draughts, and, of course, about dinner-time all the spring-doors would be open. I—ah—I suppose Challoner only got up at dinner-time?"

"Oh no; he was up in his room all day, I believe, and he came into the boudoir about four."

"And you were all there till eight?"

"We were; we were all there till eight. And after eight, too; we returned there for the evening."

"Oh!"

"Even Overton made one of the party. You may imagine how we were flattered; at least *you* may not imagine, as you don't know Overton, but to any one else that would tell its own tale."

"Of Lord Overton's boredom?"

"Oh dear, no; of our agreeability. Overton never is bored—I mean by his own company; and therein lay the

compliment. He sought us out, actually sought us out, of his own choice and for his own benefit."

"You were a merry party then, it seems?" He was not to be disconcerted.

"Very. We usually are."

"It was not Mr Challoner's doing then?"

Whether she heard or not he could not be sure; she was appealed to at the moment, and responded to the appeal, and let Mr Whewell's playfulness pass; and after all, it did not signify, he considered, since whatever cause he might have to feel chagrined at the cheery aspect which Lady Matilda persisted in giving to reminiscences in which he had had no share, it would have been absurd to be jealous of Challoner. She might choose to torment him, but she would never take any notice of Challoner; and as being tormented was many degrees better than being let alone, he presently plucked up spirit to try again.

"We are not in the little room to-day," he said.

"We are too large a number to-day," replied the lady.

"Might we not make an adjournment? Some of us, at least?"

"And for that, we are again too small a number."

"It is unfortunate. We are only two more than yesterday."

"Two too many." But Lady Matilda smiled, and it was impossible to tell how much was meant.

"You are—are terribly exact, I perceive," rejoined Whewell, trying to laugh; "are you always so? Would one more, for instance, have been too many yesterday?"

"Well, you could have had no chair, you know."

"I should have been *de trop*, evidently."

"You could have been accommodated with a footstool."

"At your feet?"

Again she had to affect not to hear; she was determined not to quarrel with the man. He was going on



the morrow—she had heard Robert say he was going on the morrow—and to hold on only a little longer would not be hard.

“Well, no,” said Matilda, pleasantly; “I think, after all, I should have yielded you my chair. I think that if there had been four gentlemen I should have been the person *de trop*; I should have had to make my exit, and leave you and the other three in possession of the field. You must own, Mr Whewell, that four to one is too many, altogether too many; as it was——”

“Your party was complete?” He was scanning her keenly.

No, she would not go as far as that. “The room pre- full, quite another thing,” said Matilda; “but my there are more rooms than one in the house. Yesterday one need pretend that he was not wanted,” wdown-stairs, ting smile, “because he was lazy and preferre ors to a tiresome disagreeable wet walk.” large house li-

“Indeed, indeed,” began Whewell, expounded Whewe

“Oh dear me, there is nothing to have so much it. Why, Mr Whewell, cannot you see that I was jesting? Pray do not look so serious; you appal me.”

He began to feel appalled himself. “I am sorry to offend you, Lady Matilda.”

“I grant you my pardon, Mr Whewell.” With her finest mock curtsy she laughed in his face, and he thought he had never seen any one more incomprehensible. “Come,” continued she, throwing off the look the next instant—“come, let us understand each other. My son-in-law has, I perceive, been infecting you with some of his notions as to the exactions of propriety. He and you have already been beyond praise in the way you have done your duty by your sick friend—Robert’s sick friend, I mean—and still your consciences are not satisfied, because you failed to come over in a deluge yesterday, when no sensible person would ever have thought of

setting foot outside; when none of us did," (she had forgotten Teddy, but perhaps Teddy could hardly be reckoned a sensible person), "and when we should not have thought very highly of—to be precisely truthful—of you or Robert if you had. In short, nothing would have amazed us more than to see you walk in," added she, happily oblivious at the moment of another fact—namely, that she had listened throughout most of the afternoon, and through a part of it in what was almost an agony of apprehension, for his approaching step, and that she had only dared to give him up when darkness had fairly set in.

At last she felt that she had disposed of the question, and had done so without abating a hair's-breadth of her dignity and sweetness, and without, she hoped, giving more pain than was absolutely necessary. That she had given some was a matter of course—he had forced it from her; and his now saying nothing further showed that he was suffering.

"Are they to be asked to stay dinner?" presently whispered Teddy in her ear. "Eh? I can't hear. Are they?"

"As Overton likes," replied his sister indifferently.

"Are they, or are they not? What do you mean? Who is to know what Overton likes?"

"Let him ask them."

"Him? Overton?"

"Yes."

"Am I to tell him to ask them?"

"Oh dear, Teddy, yes; I tell you, yes. I think he had better. I think it would be better. Go you and tell him. But pray do not show that you come straight from me; it will make it seem at once as if it were all my doing, which is just what I do not want it to be," cried poor Matilda, under her breath. "Mr Whewell is looking at us now."

And Mr Whewell was ; and it was all as plain as day to him—or he thought it was—when, a very few minutes afterwards, he noted Lord Overton drawn aside in Teddy's most diplomatic fashion, and charged with an invitation which was fired off on the instant. His depressed spirits rose on elastic springs once more, and all Matilda's work had to be done over again.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### MATILDA WOULD HAVE PROVOKED A SAINT.

“ Must then your faithful swain expire,  
And not one look obtain,  
Which he, to soothe his fond desire,  
Might pleasingly obtain ?  
(Phyllis, without frown or smile,  
Sat and knotted all the while.) ”

— SEDLEY.

As to declining, it was not to be thought of. Without hesitation every objection was disposed of as it appeared. They had dined, certainly they had dined, and dined most plentifully in the middle of the day, and one o'clock was quite the correct hour for Sunday in the country no doubt. He wished for no more dinner, assuredly for no more *dinner*; but if Lord Overton were good enough to desire their *company*, that was another thing. And then how very glad, how devoutly thankful Mrs Hanwell would be to be rid of them for a little longer ; it would be quite a charity, quite a Sunday deed, to take two such malcontents off the poor lady's hands. And as to the dark night ? It was already dark, it would be no darker four hours hence ; and as he spoke he fixed his bright black penetrating eyes keenly, and amorously, and exultingly on Lady Matilda.

That look undid him ; she wondered how she could ever have found Mr Whewell agreeable, even tolerably agreeable ; and in the revulsion that had now set in, was almost ready to hope that she would never set eyes upon him again.

Never, at least, would she meet his.

On his part, Whewell fancied that his present alacrity and persistency was setting to rights whatever had been wrong before, and that, supposing Lady Matilda had (as was likely enough in spite of her making-believe to the contrary) been piqued by his neglect on the previous day, she should now see that neither Robert's obstinacy nor anything else should force him from her side. He would shirk no discomforts for her sake ; and since she had even gone out of her way to make her brother give the invitation instead of doing it herself, she should lose nothing by her modest coyness.

He stayed alone. Robert, true to himself and Lotta, could not be persuaded, and at length, rather to his amazement and much to his discomfiture, found himself trudging back through mud and mire, companionless, both his cherished guests left behind, both deserters, both irreclaimable. His suggestion that Challoner should now renew his visit to Endhill had been scouted by Teddy, and even met by something like warmth on the part of Lord Overton. "Go? Nonsense!" the latter had exclaimed. "We like your friend Challoner, and he seems to like us, and as we don't see many people, you have done us a good turn in bringing him here. He is going to stop on a bit, and as soon as his hand gets all right he can shoot. There is nothing to take him away." And with this his nephew had been obliged to be content.

He had no reason to complain ; that Challoner and Whewell had each been in his way a success was doubtless gratifying : but still there was something in Chal-

loner's looking so much at home, so calm and still and imperturbable and comfortable in the corner of the big sofa by the fire, so entirely as if he were *their* man—Matilda's, Overton's, and Teddy's—that, considering none of them had ever seen him ten days before, and that it was not to visit *them* but *him*, and to be godfather to *his* baby, that Challoner had come, there was something in all this, in the baby's having fallen so completely into the background, and in the present oblivion of all that had been so prominent before, that seemed to turn the whole affair topsy-turvy.

From the very beginning things had worked oddly,—he would not say even to himself amiss, but oddly, incongruously. First had been the hasty and ill-timed appearance of the brother and sister at Endhill, then Lady Matilda's absurd preference for Whewell over Challoner, then Challoner's unfortunate accident, and finally, Whewell's protracted stay. Now here they were both at Overton, both enthroned at Overton, able to do without him at Overton, in clover, and clover which he had not provided, at Overton; and here was he, neither sharing the welcome nor the good cheer to which he had been the stepping-stone, suffered to depart hungry and cheerless, and with the chance of being wet through, on his weary and solitary homeward way.

It was hard on Robert, but perhaps Whewell had not a very much better time of it in the Overton drawing-room.

He did not know how it was that he did not get on better: Matilda neither shunned him nor frowned on him, and yet he seemed to lose ground with her every hour. With her brothers also: Lord Overton had never been jovial, but now he passed the wine with scarcely a remark, while Teddy only seemed to brighten at all when he again volunteered the useful T-cart.

Certainly the thing—he knew what he meant—the thing was not to be done this time; he should have

to come again—to come as soon as he could, and with the best face he could; and with this conviction he must give all his attention now to concealing his disappointment and keeping up appearances to the last. It was no easy task, and took all his tactics. He said to himself that Matilda would have provoked a saint, and that he was no saint, and that she ought to have known it; but it did not occur to him that she did know it, and that the winning manner, the instantaneous turning to him when he took a seat near, the hoping that he would have better sport another time—that next autumn, if he were down in the neighbourhood, the birds would be more plentiful,—good heavens! next autumn, to a man who wished to come down next week!—that all of this, which was just what he did not want, and could have done without, was a woman's defensive armour donned on purpose. More and more gloomy grew his brow, and more and more sweet and gracious and queen-like grew her smile.

She saw that she was doing it nicely.

She could not have done it more nicely. He was biting his lip with vexation at the last; and yet he feared and hated the parting hour. It seemed as if, did he let her go now, he should never get near Matilda again.

It was a wild night, and scarce a star was visible in the perturbed and disordered heavens. "We shall get along famously," said Teddy. "The roads will be as soft as butter after all this rain. I can take you round by the downs if you like, only we might find a tree or two down across our way; perhaps we had better not. Are you ready, for the mare is a bad one to stand?"

Whewell was ready. That was to say, he had said his "Good-bye," and had failed in saying more; he had received no future invitation; he had elicited no regret; and he had had to feel a cheerful shake of his hand when he had meant to impart a doleful pressure. Matilda's

whole aspect throughout the evening had been cruelly, uncompromisingly brisk—brisk was the only word for it. She had not cut him off from any farewell speeches, she had been pleased to acknowledge his suitable gratitude with a suitable rejoinder, and she had walked with him to the door of the ante-room, to hope this and that and be sorry for the other; but she had not uttered one word he had cared to hear; and his last vision, as he went his way, was of Challoner—the erewhile luckless despised Challoner—standing on the hearthrug, as it seemed in full possession of the hearthrug, with Lord Overton by his side, and with Lord Overton's hand lying on his shoulder. Do what he could, he could not shake off that remembrance.

A week went by, and Challoner was still at Overton; a fortnight, and Challoner was still at Overton.

"And no word of his going," said Robert Hanwell to his wife. "Of course we cannot have him now: it is out of the question, with all the workmen about, and this visit to my father's pending besides. But they will not hear of his leaving the Hall. 'Pon my word, it looks so peculiar, considering the circumstances, that I—I——." He hardly knew how to take it, in short. He half liked it, and half not. It was such an odd thing to do, as he had said before,—so odd and unconventional and unlike other people, and like, oh so like Lotta's people,—that it could not be quite right, and yet it was not easy to see wherein it was wrong.

Every time he met Teddy, to his "Challoner still with you?" Teddy would be quite surprised.

With them? Of course he was with them. What should he go away for?

Lady Matilda, more communicative, would comment on her brothers' predilection for the stranger, and on their absolute refusal to let his stay come to an end.

"He will be like the good divine—I forget who it was

—who went to his friends for a night and remained with them for thirty years,” she cried. “Thirty years hence will see Mr Challoner still at Overton, still longing to go, and still unable to give any reason for going. That is what goes on now. Teddy will not be satisfied without the reason, and Mr Challoner can find none. Now that he has left the army he has nothing to do, so then Teddy will have it out, ‘Why?’ And as there is no ‘why’ forthcoming, stay he must. Overton says it is the sharpest thing our Teddy ever did.”

“And do you like it?” queried Lotta. She would not have liked it herself; but then, as she reflected, mamma never had taken any part in the housekeeping, so possibly she did not mind that shilly-shallying hanging on from day to day which would have been a great trouble to most housekeepers. To be sure, housekeeping at Overton was not the same as at Endhill. All the same, mamma was not fond of visitors staying in the house for any length of time, uncle Edward being so peculiar, and uncle Overton such a recluse.

Lady Matilda, however, protested that she did not in this instance object. Mr Challoner was a good guest, and her brothers liked him,—and then she talked rather quickly of other things.

By degrees she said less and less of Mr Challoner. She was not much at the cottage at this time. She had a cold, a headache, engagements, one thing and the other to prevent her; and in particular, she had taken to walking instead of riding.

“I met Lady Matilda walking with Mr Challoner along the downs to-day,” announced Robert once.

Lady Matilda had turned out of her way to stop him, and had called to him gaily, and greeted him affectionately; inquiries had been made after her daughter, and kisses sent to her grandson; and she had further been careful to explain how her poor horse had hurt his foot.



and so her poor Teddy had had to ride alone, and she and Mr Challoner had been forced to come out for a walk.

Her poor Teddy had had to ride alone for some days, and Mr Challoner and Matilda had been out walking on each of these; but this did not transpire on the occasion of meeting Robert. "It was so dull and disconsolate in the house," she had added demurely.

She had not looked particularly dull and disconsolate: the sea-wind, or something else, had brought a rich warm colour to her cheek, and her eyes had looked full and soft, and her warm plaid shawl had been snugly wrapped round her shoulders, and her dark hat had become her, and altogether she had had a bright and rosy and pleasant appearance; and had she not taken pains to be pleasant to *him*, Robert might have disapproved all this, and felt that it was even more to be deprecated and regretted than usual. But Matilda had smiled on him that smile that no mortal man could resist—and he so seldom had it, poor fellow!—and she had slipped her hand so confidently within his arm, and stepped along so willingly by his side, and had made him altogether so entirely one of the party, that he had quite apologised when he had had to leave them, and had felt almost rude in letting them turn to walk back to Overton alone.

But then it had been getting on to five o'clock, and Lady Matilda having Mr Challoner to take care of her, with such an escort could not really have needed any other. He had not been required—but he had been hushed and stroked down—and the result was that to Lotta's "Mamma and Mr Challoner!" he replied with an explanation that was almost more than an apology; it amounted to an eulogium.

"I must own I was surprised," he said; "it was really too kind of Lady Matilda. To be taken out by Lady Matilda herself is a compliment Challoner must certainly feel; and after the coolness with which, I am bound to

confess, she treated him at the first, he will appreciate it the more. Challoner is not a man upon whom any attention is thrown away ; and to do your mother justice, Lotta,—excuse my speaking frankly, my dear, but really your mother is so very peculiar and unreliable—one never knows what she will do, in short,—I own I had hardly expected such an open display of her change of mind.”

“Oh, mamma flies round like a weathercock,” replied Lotta, somewhat tartly. “You need never be surprised at anything mamma does ; and she will say one thing one minute and another the next. For instance yesterday,—what do you think she said about cook yesterday ? I told her that we had begun to suspect now that cook had had a hand in Sarah’s leaving, and she stopped me at once, before I had even begun to explain what made us think so, with ‘Well, my dear, dismiss her,’—you know that quick way mamma has,—‘Well, my dear, dismiss her,’ she said, as if it were nothing to dismiss a woman like cook. I would not on any account dismiss her unless I had good grounds, really good grounds, for doing so ; so when I tried to explain this to mamma,—I was trying to show that we had no direct *proofs*, and could not be absolutely *certain* at present, when she cried out, ‘Well, my dear, don’t dismiss her,’—all in a minute, after she had said ‘Dismiss her’ two seconds before ! And she would not let me utter another word,” continued Lotta, whom no one else than Lady Matilda ever contrived to stop. “She actually put her fingers in her ears and laughed at me ; then she began playing cup and ball by herself till Mr Challoner came in.”

“Oh, Challoner was here at the same time she was yesterday ?”

“Why, of course he was, Robert—I told you so ; but he would not sit down. He came in on his way from the woods ; he had been shooting, and called here on his way back. It was scarcely on his way either, but he had

evidently wished to call—and you know he did owe us a call;—but then, when he found mamma here, he was obliged to cut his stay short, as it was getting late, and mamma could not walk home at his pace, he said; otherwise he would have waited to see you; for I told him that you had only gone out to the workmen, and would be in again directly. However, he would not let me send, as he was afraid it would be dark before they got home, if he did. It was a pity that mamma was here.”

“Certainly—yes. Still, I am glad Lady Matilda had the opportunity of seeing for herself the sort of person Challoner is; probably she had never before had him alone,” (how little Robert knew!) “and no doubt it was their meeting here yesterday that induced her to show him the cliffs to-day. He had never seen the high cliff before, and your mother had undertaken to show it him. It was extremely polite of Lady Matilda; and she took great pains to signal to me to join them, I assure you. She was waving and calling to me for some time before I discovered who it was. I saw two figures, but never dreamed of its being your mother and Challoner; and they might have passed me quite well had they wished to do so, but they were determined to make me go along with them. They would not let me off. Really I had not been going their way, but I could not refuse when your mother set upon me; and though it may have partly been that she was tired of Challoner, still I don’t know; they seemed on excellent terms, and there was nothing rude to him in what Lady Matilda said; she walked between us and took my arm. Well, of course it was natural that she should have more to say to me than to one who is not a member of the family; and I must say this—I always have said it—that no one can make herself more agreeable than Lady Matilda when she chooses—she really could not have been pleasanter than she was this afternoon.”

"Oh, mamma can be pleasant enough,"—but before the young lady could get her tongue in, he was proceeding in his own ponderous periods,—“We had a most sociable walk; and though Challoner did not take much part in the conversation—he is a silent fellow at the best of times—he and Lady Matilda seemed quite to understand each other: he carried her shawl, for she had brought a shawl to spread on the rocks where she sits down.”

“Sits down! What a foolish thing to do!”

“Certainly, quite so; very foolish, no doubt. I would not sit out on a day like this myself; but your mother is very strong, and not apt to take cold, I fancy. I recommended them to the best place. They would be quite sheltered in the spot I selected; and after walking from the Hall to the high cliff, Lady Matilda would really require a rest. She owned to being a little tired, which she seldom does. That was why they stopped at the cliff, and did not come on here; and besides, the roads are in such a shameful state, as Lady Matilda said—quite unfit for ladies.”

“Mamma never minds that.”

“Quite so; I thought she never did. I was glad to hear her allow as much, for Lady Matilda is far too venturesome as a rule.”

“She should never have been out to-day.”

“Oh, indeed it was a far better day than you have the least idea of, my love. Sitting indoors listening to the wind gave you no notion of what a fine soft air it really was. A turn in the garden, with a wrap round your head, would have done you all the good in the world. I assure you I quite regretted that I had not suggested it to you. It really seemed quite selfish to have all the enjoyment myself, for it certainly was extremely enjoyable: as Lady Matilda said, the sea in itself was a sight worth braving the chance of a ducking for. Well, I did

not altogether agree to that; but no doubt when we got up to the furze common, and saw round the east point where the rocks jut out, it was very fine, uncommonly fine. As Lady Matilda said, we have had nothing as fine this year; Lady Matilda has undoubtedly an eye for the picturesque in nature, and Challoner——”

“——Well, I must say,” burst forth Lotta, finding at length something on which an indefinite gathering annoyance could wreak itself——“I must say that I do wonder at you, Robert: you seem to be quite pleased that mamma and Mr Challoner should be wandering about the country all alone by themselves. You who are so very particular about these things, how would you have liked *me* to be seen miles from home, all by myself, with a young man? What would you have said if I had set off with Mr Whewell, or——or any one else, to visit the high cliff, and walk along those lonely downs, where you may walk for hours and never come across a living soul? I would not have done such a thing for the world. If I had ever *wished* to do it——and I never should have wished, I am sure——you would have been the very *last* person to have encouraged me; you would have been quite shocked. You——”

“——My dear!” gasped he.

“And yet, just because you were taking part in it yourself——”

“——My dear Lotta,”——but Robert was for perhaps the first time in his life fairly at a loss. It was quite true that it *was* because he had been taking part in it himself——that because he had been freshened by a pleasant walk in pleasant company, and had been unwittingly cajoled into benevolence, he was thus lenient and amiable; and could he deny it? “I—I—really,” he exclaimed. “Really,” beginning to recover himself, “you take a very incorrect, and, I must add, prejudiced view of the case.”

“Prejudiced! Well, I don’t see how that can be,” re-

joined the young lady, pursuing her advantage. "Considering that it is only your own account I have to go by, if I am prejudiced, it is likely to be on your side," which had a distinct element of truth in it, and scored indubitably a point for Charlotte. "Your own version of what took place is the only one I have heard; so if I do not look upon it in the same light as you do, I cannot see how it is that I can be prejudiced on the other side. All I say is, how would you like people to see me going about like that? Should you approve if I were to do as mamma does?"

"Certainly not," replied Robert, promptly; "but, my dear, you mistake the case. Your mother is—is placed in a peculiar position, living as she does with your uncles, and they being—at least your uncle Overton being so solitary in his habits——"

"——There is always uncle Edward."

"Your uncle Edward was otherwise engaged to-day. Lady Matilda took particular pains to explain this to me. I fancy she thought I might feel a passing surprise at meeting her and Mr Challoner out by themselves, but I did not at all—not in the slightest. I saw at once how it was; Challoner could hardly have been sent out alone——"

"Why not?"

"Impossible, my love; it would have been most impolite—discourteous, I should say."

"Then he could have ridden with uncle Edward."

"You may take my word for it that there was a sufficient reason for his not doing so. I forget what it was, but of this I am confident, that Lady Matilda explained it entirely to my satisfaction; and as for there being anything improper in Lady Matilda's escorting Challoner herself, if *that* is what you insinuate, my dear,"—(Richard was now himself, every inch himself again, and could have felled to the earth a dozen Lottas with his fiats, had they

lifted up their voices against his)—“really, ahem! I am amazed that so extremely absurd and unsuitable an idea should have entered your head. I confess I should never have anticipated such an objection. As if any lady of your mother’s age and standing could not be trusted to walk alone with a gentleman without remarks being made! Remember this, my love, that it is not in the thing itself; it is in its being a cause for remark that the real objection lies. I could trust you with any one, Lotta, of course; but it would be highly indiscreet in either of us to run the risk of people gossiping; but,” raising his voice, “but—I know perfectly what you would say, my dear—one moment—allow me,” with his hand in the air, “you and your mother are two very different people: you are eighteen, and Lady Matilda is thirty-seven. Thirty-seven: ahem! If that is not answer enough for you, it is for me. I have my own ideas; and I must say—you must permit me to say it, my love—that I never before had my ideas on the matter of impropriety called in question.”

So saying, he closed the debate, and stalked from the room master of the field.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### MOONLIT WAVES.

“The twilight is sad and cloudy,  
The wind blows wild and free,  
And like the wings of sea-birds  
Flash the white caps of the sea.”

—LONGFELLOW.

“Who is coming to see the waves to night?” inquired Teddy that evening at dinner. “They were breaking over the lifeboat-house forty feet high last night, Spiers

tells me, and half the town was out watching them. I wish we had been there; we ought to have been there; I felt such a fool not even to have known anything about it. How did we not know, Matilda? Somebody should have told us."

"We did not see anybody to tell us, and we did not think of it for ourselves," replied she; "besides——" and she glanced at her elder brother.

"Well, I'm going to-night anyhow," said Teddy, in his "I've made up my mind" tone; "I don't care who stays behind. Spiers says the tide will be full between ten and eleven, and they say it is going to be splendid. Spiers says the shopkeepers and people have been barricading their windows all day, for a lot of windows got smashed last night, and even right up the back streets the water poured into the cellars. Spiers says everybody was there; it seemed so stupid for us not to be there."

"How is the sea so high?" inquired Challoner. "Though there has been some wind, it has hardly amounted to anything of a gale."

"It's the time of year for it," said Teddy, lucidly. "I don't know why, but always about this time of year the sea goes mad; and we ought to have known it," looking reproachfully at Matilda. "Why didn't the Applebys or some one tell us? They were there, I'll be bound."

"It is quite a sight then," said Challoner, and then he too looked at Lady Matilda, and she knew perfectly what his look as well as her brother's meant.

"If Overton likes," she murmured, hesitatingly.

Now why should Matilda have hesitated; why did she not, as she would once have done, respond eagerly and joyously to the implied desire? A week ago and she would have been herself the one to propose just such an expedition; and yet now—now when the idea sends a thrill through her veins and a throb through her heart—she sits with downcast eyes and scarcely finds words for



a response. Can it be that something has already passed between her and Challoner on the subject? Is he, perchance, not so absolutely ignorant on the subject as one would suppose? Teddy, at least, sees nothing of this, and is impatient and alarmed; he has already been done out of the sport—been absent when every one else was present the previous evening—and he is ready to protest and explode, indeed to defy authority altogether, if a voice is raised in opposition now. There is not in reality the slightest chance of any such voice being raised; even Overton himself is rather disposed for the thing than not—it is a kind of adventure he can enjoy. Nobody puts him forward, or makes him of consequence, or worries him, or pesters him on this sort of occasion; and accordingly—

“I’ll go if you like,” he said quite good-humouredly; “the night is fine enough——”

“——Fine enough! I should just say so, rather;” cried his brother, his excitement rising to a height. “Now, Matilda, you give in; just you say no more, but get your things on and come along too; when even Overton is going——”

“——Oh, of course,” assented his sister very gently; “of course if you are—are all inclined for it, I—I should like it very much. It will be a beautiful sight, and there will be plenty of others to keep us in countenance; and with such a moon we shan’t come to grief among the hedges on our way to the town, and——”

“That’s right; that’s a good girl; I knew she would knock under in the long-run,” nodded Teddy, patronisingly. “Now do be quick over dinner, and let us get off by nine. I’ll order the phaeton at nine. Now, Matilda, you won’t keep us waiting; and, Challoner, mind it will be cold by the sea, and we may get a drenching as likely as not,—do take my topcoat; now *do*,” very earnestly. “I have dozens of coats, and——”

"Not one that Challoner could get into," observed his brother, with his slow occasional smile. "You must have it let out half a yard or so first, Ted: Challoner has an uncommonly nice topcoat of his own too. If you get us all off by nine and don't forget your topcoat for yourself, my boy," continued he, "that will be two feats in one night. Have you ordered the phaeton yet?"

He had already forgotten to ring the bell, and the bustle attendant on this, and on giving the order, kept him happily engaged throughout the remainder of the meal.

Fain would he have had them all go in the T-cart; but as that was impossible, he could at least himself drive the phaeton, with Matilda beside him, and Overton and Challoner behind,—and so he announced that the four were to be arranged. It was his expedition, and he was allowed to do with them as he chose; and though he observed that Challoner was stupid about something, and did not understand how cleverly they would all fit in when thus disposed of, he fancied that it was an inclination on Challoner's part to handle the reins himself which made him so unresponsive; and much as he liked Challoner, this was too much: he must always drive, whatever nasty things Matilda might insinuate about the hedges. As, however, nothing was said, all went well, and luckily his peace of mind was undisturbed by overhearing an aside in the hall, when his sister was having her furs fastened.

"Are you at all nervous?" said Challoner, softly.

"Not to-night; I have told William what horse to give us, and we shall only have one. I think there is no fear."

"You would not like Lord Overton to drive, or—or me?"

"He would not like it." There was a very slight emphasis on the "he," but it was caught and understood.

"It would put him out sadly: don't, please, don't say anything."

Nor did he further, but he sat well forward in the back seat, gazing on ahead with anxious, careful, protecting eyes, on along the narrow zigzag lanes, whose treacherous windings might produce anything at any moment; and somehow Matilda, as she sat just before him, was dimly conscious that there was an arm behind which would have been thrown around her at the first approach of danger.

The air was mild, and the vehemence of its fitful blasts had completely died away ere the party set out. Now there remained only a pleasant freshness, a clear bespangled sky overhead, and such soft wet roads as were delightful to traverse, when the mud only splashed the wheels of the phaeton and the glossy coat of the quiet old gig-horse. The very road-pools and ditches by the wayside were bright with moonlight, and reflected the chaise as it passed. All were comfortably tucked in, and the cigars of the gentlemen behind yielded only the faintest of fragrance to those before—"Just what she enjoys," Overton answered for his sister, as he passed the match on to his companion.

Now and then it was of course absolutely necessary to ask if she did enjoy it, to find out if she were warm and snug, to ascertain that she was not missing such and such a point in the landscape, and to this end Challoner must occasionally lean forward, and oblige her to turn her head and listen to his deep voice sunk to an undertone; but for the most part of the way the phaeton rolled on amidst a cheerful contented silence—just such a silence as Lord Overton liked—and in little more than half an hour from the time of starting they entered the outskirts of Seaburgh.

Having for the latter portion of the way been obliged to make a considerable curve, and strike inland for a

mile or so before approaching the coast again, it was not until phaeton and horse had been disposed of, and our party had hurried through some very shabby and dim back streets—not over-savoury back streets—streets that were redolent of tar, nets, stale fish, and all the concomitants of a small seaport,—it was not until these had been perforce threaded, that they began to experience some reward, or at least some apparent reward—some reward that could be taken hold of, for the exertions of the evening.

“Just you wait—just you wait,” had been a frequent exhortation in the mouth of the self-constituted leader, as Teddy, with all the importance of a general, conducted his forces round corner after corner; and truly it seemed worth the waiting for, when the great, rolling, booming breakers, which had been heard and felt and known to be near, and yet remained tantalisingly unseen for so long, at length fell at their feet.

As the authority Spiers had promised, all the world of Seaburgh was abroad to see the sight, some hurrying in one direction, some in another; and the sea-walk being for the nonce impassable, the usually unpopular and shabby short cuts and back entrances were now in the ascendant. Everybody was glad of a shelter from the flying spray, which seemed to search out the deepest hollows so long as they faced the sea, and nobody could afford to despise the poorest and narrowest back alleys which enabled them to reach their destination.

It was from a long dark by-way that our party at length emerged, to plunge no more into such, but to join the groups already assembled wherever an angle of the breakwater afforded a dry footing, or even one partially so, whence they could enjoy the weird and beauteous spectacle. Even these prudent folks were not, however, destined altogether to escape the effects of their discreet temerity: every now and then there would be a cry and

a run from venturesome boys making the most of the frolic ; while the more sober-minded, who had no desire for an encounter, and would not have willingly run any risk, would provoke risibility in their neighbours by the early reluctance and the final haste of their ignominious retreat,—they would scarce hasten a step to begin with, and would scud like the wind in the end. The careful, sedate, reasoning man, in particular, would be a source of exultation to the thoughtless : he would calculate to a nicety the time likely to be taken in making his way across a dangerous spot, and would so calculate as to take his time jauntily ; he would wait until the moment after a heavy sea had swamped the pebbly road and retreated, at which happy moment was to be exhibited to the lookers-on the excellence of his forethought, by advancing before another of any size could approach ; and he would have but gone a step or two when, lo ! he was bespattered from head to foot, the victim of a pitiless shower, and all his wisdom would be seen to have been thrown away. There was no calculating upon the monsters ; none could say how or when they would come.

All of this was, of course, fun to be rapturously appreciated by foolish Teddy Lessingham, who laughed till his sides were sore, and could not comprehend how it was that Matilda did not as usual respond to and share his ecstasies. Matilda hardly seemed to see what was going on ; she was very quiet—curiously quiet ; he could not get her to budge from a place she had chosen, whence nothing could be seen but the ocean itself—a little obscure nook, where she and Challoner stood together, and which even Overton objected to ; and though with infinite pains he secured to her, and signed and beckoned her to come forward and take possession of, a more favoured standing-place close to the railing, and almost overhanging the water, she demurred so long that the opportunity was lost. The crowds jostled together and

filled up the gap; he had to retire and give up what it had cost him so much cunning and cleverness to obtain, while even then the ungrateful creature had hardly the grace to say, "Thank you."

No wonder he was indignant; had it not been for the best joke in the world coming off at that moment, in the shape of the whole front row of spectators getting soused at once by a slyly advancing wave, which, looking as innocent as a babe, took them all by surprise before they knew where they were—had it not been for this, causing him to stamp his feet and shout with the glee of the vilest little urchin present, he would have given Matilda a piece of his mind. But by the time he got back to her, he had forgotten everything but mirth, and as she took his arm kindly and listened amiably, all was right between them. He could not, however, long be content to remain in the stupid place she had selected, and at length prevailed so far as to make her allow that there was yet more to be seen, and that perhaps it would be as well to see it. The "more" referred in especial to a bit of breakwater a few streets to the right, where the principal attraction appeared to be, to judge by the people who flocked towards the point; and as Teddy must always go where others went, and see what they saw, he was soon restless to follow to the lifeboat-house. It was against the lifeboat-house that the fullest force of the waters fell.

Hard to move as Matilda had proved, she had to own on arriving at this spot that her troublesome brother had been right: nothing they had yet seen could equal what they now beheld.

It was indeed a spectacle never to be forgotten.

White in the brilliant moonlight, the raging sea could be seen to its horizon; high into the cloudless heavens flew the fountains of foam. With a sweep and power resistless, yet with a grace ineffable and ease indescrib-

able, with a rhythm mysterious yet precision accurate, wave after wave came on, the first exquisite burst succeeded by a back-swing and curve, and then a falling away to gather up once more, and break, and break, and break again—hither, thither, this way, that way—across, athwart, afar, at hand—twining, circling, winding, wreathing—in and out, up and down, until drunk into one another at last—no beginning, no end—none alone, each a part of the other.

As the tide rose, even the highest point of the lifeboat-tower was from time to time obscured, and the little knot of watchers who had pressed forward to the front had more than once to change their ground, as the circling froth covered the space whereon they had at first stood.

Lord Overton and his party sought the shadow of a projecting gable, and still watched in silence; even admiration and exclamations died away—none cared to speak. At length, "I never saw anything like this before," said Challoner's voice behind Matilda—close, close behind her.

She did not bid him "hush," as she might have done Whewell; she did not answer, nor turn, nor move away; she stood still, feeling that he was there, and that he had been there all the time,—that he had never yielded his place, and never meant to yield it, and that as they looked, so they felt—together.

Going home, he asked her to sit behind with him.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## AND NOW IT WAS ALL OVER.

"Alas! silly fool that I was,"

(Thus, sadly complaining, he cried),—

"When first I beheld that fair face,

'Twere better by far I had died."

—Rowe.

Two hundred miles did the cruel train bear Challoner away from Overton at last.

Two hundred miles did that inhuman monster carry a reluctant wretched man; and faster and faster it sped with him away from love, delight, enchantment,—and nearer and nearer it hurried him towards despair, deceit, and misery;—further from where he would be, nearer to where he would not be;—further from Eden, nearer to the wilderness. He sat with his face backwards, emblematically. By instinct he had thrown himself into a seat which commanded the last view of the woods and uplands now so familiar, and to all time so dear,—and upon these he gazed as long as they remained in sight. They vanished, and still he looked on; he had nothing else, it seemed, to do. Newspapers, magazines, and the usual accompaniments of a traveller, had been neglected or forgotten. He had nothing to read, nor did he want anything; he had the carriage to himself, but he hardly noticed that it was so; and there was a hot-water tin, but he did not put his feet on it; and cigars in his pocket, but he did not smoke them.

Hour after hour went by and found the solitary man still in the same position, still dead to all that passed, still with eyes turned absently, softly, and tenderly towards an unseen spot, which to memory and love was yet visible.



Of what really came and went Challoner beheld nothing.

Now and again an impatient movement, a frown or a sigh, would burst forth to betray that the day-dream which proved so over-mastering had its moments of perturbation, its thorns among the rose-leaves; now and again the dreamer would start forward, sit up, pull himself together with a passing expression of the lip and motion of the hand that seemed to betoken a commencement of something new, of a resolution and decision that had not been there before,—but ever as it rose would the momentary impulse fade away again, its cold unwelcome presence thrust out by some too powerful, too exquisite rival,—and Challoner, a willing slave to the latter, would once more sink back on the luxurious cushion, lost, reveling in musings that needed no effort, and that, alas! were not to be dispelled by an effort. He was living the past month over again.

From first to last he had been a month at Overton. Excuses and arguments for thus prolonging an accidental stay, a mere detention for a single night, had been so acceptable both to himself and his hosts, that the continually postponed day of departure had almost seemed as though it never would come, never could really and actually arrive; and when at length it had, it had seen him depart, wellnigh in silence, and wellnigh mad with the wild longing for a reprieve in any shape and from any quarter.

Yet would he not reprieve himself; and the brothers had had to let him go, less concerned than he, it is true, but still grudgingly, reluctantly, flatteringly, with many an injunction to "Come again,"—and what Lady Matilda had felt she had kept to herself.

And now it was all over, and he had only to look back upon it.

Never again must he cross that friendly threshold and

hear that pleasant welcome; he had touched for the last time that fair hand, had met for the last time that dark eye, had heard a final farewell in that gentle voice. No sign had Matilda made; in no wise could he or any other see that she had been expectant, or surprised, or grieved, or wounded,—and yet he felt, he felt he might have won her.

He might at any rate have tried his chance. He would not have been waved aside, smiled down, nipped in the bud and laid low in the dust as Whewell had been, and as he had himself seen Whewell be. Tush! he had already gone farther, dared more and gained more, than Whewell had ever dreamed of. What of those wild sea walks over the moaning cliffs, up the lonely glen, along the unfrequented woodland paths? Who saw the arm which held the slender form beneath the cliff on the brink of the foaming waterfall? Whose presence marred the twilight hour in the dim old gallery? For whom alone was the soft strain of music when the light was gone? And there had been a day when her flowers had been worn by him, and her song had been sung for him,—when Overton had stopped short in his speech and held his breath as though struck all at once by a truth too strange for fancy, and Teddy had flung himself out of the room, and had scarce been seen or spoken to for days after.

It had been Challoner, Challoner himself, the conscious cause of it all, who had brought back the penitent to Matilda's side eventually.

He had come on Challoner's arm, looking on Challoner as his friend, indebted to Challoner as the peacemaker—and Challoner had lain awake half the night afterwards. Not even the angrily affectionate beseechings of this brother had prevailed to make him stay on at Overton after this. With a letter which came in at breakfast in his hand, and with its urgency as his plea, he broke or

heaven, I retain my senses, whatever Mary and Emily may do. Emily was dying to go to cathedral this afternoon (we are turned so direfully devout nowadays, you must know, Jem); since Herbert came after Emily——”

“Do hush,” said Emily with a nudge; “how you do run on, Bertha! and can’t you see that Jem is not attending to you one little bit? He is wondering where his baggage is, are you not, Jem? What part was it put in? Where is the van? Back, or front?”

“Back, I think.”

He had no idea, but he had to say one or the other.

“Well, if it is back, what do you go front for?” inquired Miss Emily, innocently.

She thought it very amusing, as did they all, to see the solitary portmanteau extracted, at length, from beneath the very seat whereon Challoner had been sitting, and to note how little he either knew or cared about it; she insisted on jumping into the carriage herself to see what else he had left behind, not being at all clear, she protested, whether an arm or a leg might not be found missing presently. And she searched, and inquired, and made merry over the subject, till his rueful smile faded away from sheer impatience, and the disgust of his soul was almost visible on his countenance. What had brought the girls there? He had never dreamed of their being all down to meet him at the station, and at the best of times would have dispensed with the attention, while *to-day*——. They stood about enjoying themselves and the attention they attracted, and they put their little hands in their pockets, and stamped their smart little feet, and shuddered and shook their shoulders, and all spoke at once, and rather too eagerly to their distinguished friend, their six-feet-two of straw-coloured Harris cloth; and they were in the porters’ way and the passengers’ way, and jostled by one and another, and remarked upon by everybody—so that though no harm was done, and there

was nothing actually reprehensible in the scene, it jarred terribly on a man who had been thinking for the last six or seven hours, nay, for the last three or four weeks, of a Lady Matilda. Lady Matilda, had she seen his present company, would have passed them by as though she saw them not; but she would have thought—too well he knew what she would have thought: all at once it seemed to flash upon him as a revelation that Matilda was the very proudest woman he had ever known.

“He’s napping!”

“He is not well.”

“Boh!” cried the third, close to his ear.

“Behave, Bertha,” remonstrated both of Bertha’s sisters, tittering with their fingers before their mouths; “behave, can’t you, you bad girl!” continued Mary; “don’t you see people are looking? Jem, do tell her.”

Oh, if he could: if there had been any question of telling; if he could only have ordered them off the platform, out of sight and out of hearing! But no; where they went, he must go: and though they might, and at length did lead the way, the victim had to follow, and to follow close behind. Had they been his sisters—but they were not his sisters; and as the quartet march out of the station and up to the town—for it was agreed to walk rather than drive—we may, without farther mystery or circumlocution, inform our readers who and what were these new arrivals on the scene. They were the daughters of worthy William Tufnell, the principal banker of Clinkton, to which place Challoner had now come,—and one of the three was his betrothed bride.

Now Challoner had not found any particular fault with the eldest Miss Tufnell either in face, figure, or demeanour, when a few months previously, it had been suggested by a careful elder sister that a wife for him might be found in the family of the wealthy banker. He had met Mary Tufnell at his sister’s house. She was

pretty, well dressed, and sprightly—perhaps over-sprightly; but being a grave man, whom chatter did not repel merely because it was chatter, he saw in the somewhat fatiguing flow of spirits which never failed, only the light-heartedness of extreme youth, and willing to be amiable, fell in with the notion of matrimony tolerably soon and tolerably easily. He was getting on in life, as Lady Fairleigh said. He would rather like to show his friends that he could do something yet, and something with a flavour of thirty thousand pounds, moreover: since Tufnell was known to be worth ninety thousand if he were worth a penny, and the three daughters who have already been introduced in this chapter, were his sole children and heirs.

Then Lady Fairleigh had been able to point out that homely as was their origin, there attached both respect and credit to the family; that no one ever had, or ever would have, a word to say against the match; that the proposed bride was barely twenty years of age, at which time of life she would soon unlearn all that it was desirable should be unlearnt—whereas with equal speed she might be counted upon to pick up all that it was requisite to know; that she appeared to be good-humoured, well educated, and adaptable,—in fine, that for a younger son, a son who had abandoned his profession, and had never had any prospects—for Jem Challoner, in short, her dear, good, kind, improvident brother Jem—nothing could be better than to offer his heart and hand with all convenient speed in such a convenient quarter.

Jem thought so too—with regard to the hand at least; as to the heart, he was over forty years of age, and supposed his falling-in-love days were over.

But he had a high opinion of Lady Fairleigh's judgment, and on this occasion it jumped with his own too entirely not to double its value. He would certainly act upon it, make hay while the sun shone, and take to his

domestic hearth, if fortune favoured, the cheerful smiling lassie provided for him.

Was he to know that in her, as in himself, he had been grossly, terribly mistaken? Was he to tell that in her own home and among her own folks the Mary he knew, or thought he knew, would develop into another Mary, and a Mary that affrighted his inmost soul? Was he to suspect that the lively banter, necessarily kept in check at Lady Fairleigh's table, and in Lady Fairleigh's drawing-room, would run riot in the unrestraint of home, and would resolve itself into chaff, chaff, chaff from morning till night? It was said of the Miss Tufnells that they would chaff a man till he did not know which was his head and which were his heels; but, alas! Challoner found nothing to admire in the gift.

A great mistake had been made—a mistake which could never be unmade; and of one thing he was speedily convinced, that it could only be away from Clinkton, from her native place, with its native associations, surroundings, and dialect, that he could hope to regain any measure of the complacency with which he had at first regarded his *fiancée*. He stayed at Clinkton a week, and left without fixing the wedding-day.

But then, as Mary's mother observed, that was just like his thoughtfulness. He did not wish to hurry anybody, and he knew what a piece of work it would be when once it came to taking away from her and papa their Mary. And to be sure, Mary was young enough, and there was time enough, and she could not be thankful enough, nor think enough of Mr Jem for his consideration.

Such consideration even won upon the old banker himself. He had been both gruff and grumpy at the first demand for his daughter's hand; he had eyed Jem Challoner's letter—for the thing had been done by letter—with mistrust, and had hummed and hawed, and not known very well whether to say "Yes" or "No." But

one thing and another, in particular, Mrs Tufnell's anxiety to get her daughters married, or, as she phrased it, "off," carried the day. A neighbour had got two daughters "off," each at the age of eighteen, and this had caused even Tufnell's broad bosom to share his wife's chagrin after a fashion. So that what with the timely remembrance, and the feeling that he was now sued by a member of one of the oldest of the county families, and that the match, if agreed to, would at once lift him and his into the county set—the set just above his, the step just beyond him—it was impossible to be quite as independent and indifferent as he would have liked to appear.

Moreover, he knew about Jem, and knew that there were worse men. Supposing his girl were to set her heart upon a worse man—upon one of those silly, noisy, vapouring, elbowing, ridiculous apes at the barracks, for instance! There were plenty of them about; and if he had not snapped his teeth at every single grinning face that grinned behind its hairy horns upon his doorsteps, the moustachioed gentlemen would have crept up the girls' sleeves, and carried them off by hook or by crook before now. He had had a time of it, since Mary and Emily grew up, that he had; but he had kept the red-coats off somehow: they cut out of his way like greyhounds if he came across them nowadays.

But James Challoner was different, and in the end the banker gave Challoner a fairly cordial reply.

Then the two met, and the good impression deepened. Hitherto they had only occasionally seen each other, or a part of each other; and Challoner had known that the burly pair of shoulders in front of him belonged to Tufnell the banker, and the banker had been aware that the hat which towered high above the other hats in the busy street pertained to old Mr Challoner's youngest son—and that was all. Now, face to face, all went well.

All might have gone ill very easily. Had the suitor

shown himself keen, or sharp, or pressing; had he, on the other hand, affected ignorance of Mr Tufnell's affairs, and declined to be enlightened; had he, in heroic mood, raved and protested—had he even talked of his Mary as “his,” he had undone all.

But by no such means had Challoner sought to strengthen his position. He had been perfectly moderate and truthful. He liked the young lady, and thought that they could be happy together; he should be glad to find that a marriage with her was likely to meet with the approval of both families. In almost as few words as these, the state of his mind had been set forth, and such laconic simplicity and straightforwardness had gone down wonderfully with an old gentleman who was ever on the look-out for artifice and exaggeration. At the end of their first interview, he had risen and held fast Challoner's hand. “You shall have my daughter, sir; and you shall have her fortune. Mr Challoner, I shall be proud and content to give them both into your hands.” Indeed he thought as much of the one as the other; and perhaps there are other people in the world besides the worthy Tufnell who consider thirty thousand pounds a very fair equivalent to an amiable, ordinary, pretty daughter.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE FRIENDS OF HIS FRIENDS.

“The outward forms the hidden man reveal—  
We guess the pulp before we cut the peel.”

—HOLMES.

Still better pleased had been Challoner's future father-in-law as time had gone on. That there had been no



word of a speedy union, no hinting at settlements, and no urging him to fix a day or even a time, had been all that was needed to fill up the measure of the regard in which he held Mary's lover. *There was a man for you! There was sense and stamina!* If the girl had set her heart upon one of those ridiculous apes at the barracks now, how different it would have been! He would have been worried out of his life about the folly of long engagements, and the necessity for making arrangements, and the uncertainty of their movements,—and certes, they and such as they, who might have to pack their traps and tramp at any moment, would have had some reason on their side for looking sharp and making the money-bags sure; but see, here was Mr Challoner, quite pleased to be as he was, to come and go, and court Mary like a gentleman,—and he should not lose by it; he should see that, when the lawyers were called in. And a right noisy, jolly, old-fashioned hullabaloo of a wedding they would have when wedding-time came,—that was to say, when his busy season had passed, and he could have time to think about it, and when the old Dean's cough was better, and he could tie the knot himself.

And then Challoner had departed in November, it being understood that he was to return for Christmas, but that even then nothing need definitely be settled about bringing the engagement to a close, all being of one mind on the subject. He had gone, and we know what had befallen him. His falling-in-love days over? They had never rightly begun until he saw and heard Matilda. Alas! alas!

In the absence of one suitor, however, another appeared at the banker's house. This was Mr Mildmay, a minor canon of the cathedral, who had come to Clinkton in the summer, and had made a favourable impression on the Clinkton people in general. He was an amiable young clergyman, kind-hearted, unassuming, and

indefatigable. Like Challoner, he was superior to the Tufnells in point of birth, and, again, like him, inferior to them in the matter of worldly goods; but whatever he was, he was not, according to Mr Tufnell, one of the ridiculous apes at the barracks, and he was permitted to engage himself to Emily Tufnell. Hence her sister's playful references to the devoutness and the cathedral.

Mr Mildmay now fell in with the party on their way up from the station, and it was evident that so agreeable an acquisition to their number was not altogether unexpected by the young ladies, who, all greeting and introducing at once, blocked up the narrow footpath in a way that Challoner would fain have pointed out, but instead had to find himself the recipient of a vigorous shake of the hand, and sympathetic congratulatory "How are you?" of the warmest description; to which, I am sorry to say, he replied by a jerk of his head, and a "How do?" in a tone never heard at Overton Hall.

Of this, however, his fair companions, happily unconscious, took no note; for all their attention being diverted by Herbert's appearance into a fresh channel, Herbert and not Jem was for the moment everything.

"Well, Herbert?"

"What news, Herbert?"

"Will the room be full, Herbert?"

Herbert thought the room would be full; he also thought the night would be fine, and that the sky would be clear; furthermore, he proceeded to fear that the lecture, which it was explained to Challoner he was to deliver that evening in the Town-hall of Clinkton on the valleys of Palestine, would bore him sadly, and kindly hoped that he would not think it necessary to turn out to hear it. His friends had let him in for the lecture, but that was no reason—with a cheerful laugh—why he should let his friends in for listening to it: he was afraid he should be dreadfully prosy.

As he trotted along, off and on the pavement every moment, answering every question, responding to every remark, warning the ladies of the nearness of vehicles, finding clean crossings in the muddy streets—all devotion, good temper, and urbanity—he did wonder a little in his heart at Mr Challoner's manners. Challoner heard as though he heard not, walked as though he saw not, stalked through and round obstacles as though they did not exist, and only replied to observations when they could not be ignored. What sort of a fellow could Emily's sister have got hold of?

The girls, however, started a new idea. Poor Jem was tired. Poor Jem had been ill while he was in the south, and the journey had been too much for him, and he ought never to have walked up,—and now how naughty of him not to have said so before! When the house was reached, good Mrs Tufnell was concerned to the degree of scolding everybody all round, and could not really have believed it possible, after their preventing her sending the carriage as she had wanted to do, that they could not even have taken a cab, when there were scores of cabs at the station, but must needs make that poor dear walk up all the way, and he quite knocked up with travelling for seven hours on end. And the upshot was, that the outraged and insulted giant had actually to lie down full length upon the sofa, and submit to having a pillow shaken up under his head, and tea and muffins brought to him and placed upon a chair by his side.

Humour was not in Challoner's way, but he did see the irony of this. It did not make him merry, but it saved him from being rude. He could have pitched the sofa out of the window, and the tea and muffins after it; but he lay on the one, and swallowed the others, and he only laughed to himself rather an ugly laugh as he did so.

The rest of the party were, however, in excellent spirits. The lecture was as it should have been, the

principal theme for conversation; and hopes and fears regarding the weather, speculations as to the audience, and reckoning up the tickets gone and the tickets likely to go, filled up the time till the dinner-gong sounded. "And we dine early because of the lecture, Mr Jem," explained the elderly lady, turning to him her flushed and bonneted face, warm with the warm room and the warm tea, and the excitement of the evening in prospect. How like, oh how like Mary she was, or would be when a few years should have amplified Mary's form and deepened the red on Mary's cheek! he saw her now before him, he saw—"We dine at six," continued the speaker, as the others left the room,—“at six punctually, as we shall have to be off before seven. I wish we could have made it sooner; and indeed I could have done very well without my dinner at all, for we are to have a bit of supper when we come back; and really, with tea now, and all,—however, papa does not like to be put out of his way—not much, at least. Papa is very kind when you take him the right side, but half an hour sooner for dinner he thinks a good deal of; and so we just took the half-hour, and asked no more."

"I suppose you would like me to go?" said Challoner. To almost any other person he would have said flatly, "Nothing will induce me to go;" but he had never received anything but kindness from Mary's mother, and the rebellious speech stuck in his throat.

Even as it was, he startled her.

"My dear, are you really ill?" she cried. "Oh, I am sure you must be really ill, or you never would have thought of it. Dear me! And Mary, who has been so pleased at your being here in time, she will be so let down; but if you are really ill——"

He disclaimed the idea.

"You think the lecture will be no great thing? And between ourselves," nodding portentously, and sinking

her voice, "between ourselves, papa is of your opinion. But then, you know, poor young man, he'll do his best; and as he is to be one of ourselves very soon—indeed we look upon him, and upon you too, as quite one of ourselves already—why, we are bound to make the best of him. So I have ordered the flowers and flags, and papa pays for the hall. And to be sure, if it pleases Emily—and she will take it all for gospel—and I daresay it will be nice enough, poor dear; but don't you mind, Mr Jem," tapping him kindly on the arm,—“don't you mind, but just go to sleep if you like; we can all say you are tired out,—and I shouldn't wonder if papa naps too. Bless me! it would never do to stay away though.”

The night was clear when the party sallied forth. "Mild as milk," announced the paternal voice from the front door; and in consequence the speaker did not see fit to do more than bolster himself up in his thick overcoat, and wind his woollen comforter twice round his neck.

"No, no," cried he, as his wife put her hand within Challoner's arm; "no, no—none of that, Poll. 'Fair play's a jewel,' and you and I have had our turn; we must let the young folks have theirs now. Zounds, man, Jem! you didn't think to take the missus, did you? That would have been a pretty sight. No, no; she must put up with the old man, and you go with your own girl there. Lead the way, lassies; come along—come along.”

Now what made Mary Tufnell's lover stumble upon another "Come along—come along," in the whirlpool of his recollections at that ill-favoured moment? He was trying to keep Overton out of his head,—to banish Overton, drown Overton, bury Overton a thousand leagues deep out of mind and out of memory,—and it seemed as if every single thing that was done and word that was spoken from minute to minute, only served to bring into stronger and more cruel light visions that cut him to the

heart. Now, as with his betrothed bride under his charge, he followed the rest of the party up the street, and Mary babbled of this thing and that, well pleased with herself and her escort, enjoying the whole to the top of her bent, and demanding attention and response every minute, one might have thought that here at least was no opportunity for torturing remembrance; and yet as Challoner spoke and listened and obeyed orders and kept up appearances—and he was sufficiently aroused and on the alert to do all this so as to excite no remark from a not over-exacting person—yet even as he did it all, he was living in another scene.

That day week he had stood with Matilda beside the moonlit waves. He felt again the cold salt air upon his cheek, beheld again the foaming ocean and the outline of a face between it and him,—a face that was so near he durst not watch too closely—a face that turned at times its mute sympathetic appeal to his,—lips that were parted to emit soft sighs of wonder and delight,—eyes that shone, reflecting in their own depths the beauty they were gazing upon; and had there not been a bold presumptuous whisper ere he and she had turned to leave the spot, and a silence that gave its own assent? Had there not been——

“Jem, Jem, what *are* you thinking about? Do take more care. You stepped straight into the very worst of the puddle.”

The hall reached, everything seemed to promise a great success: the gas flared out lustily, the flags made a gallant show upon the wall, the holly-strings looked as like arches as holly-strings could do; and Herbert met them at the door with the news that scarcely a ticket remained to be disposed of.

“That’s the thing, my boy,” replied his future father-in-law, slapping him cordially on the shoulder; “that’s the thing to stick to. Sell the tickets and never mind

the rest. Let the folks come or not; let 'em stay away if they've a mind to; let 'em drop off their chairs if they can't keep awake,—but make 'em pay for their tickets. Once they've paid for their tickets, they may behave themselves as they choose afterwards."

Our party were then ushered to their seats—front seats, but not the front seats of all, because a duke and a duchess were coming, "and Lord knows who besides," confided Mr Tufnell to the uninitiated Challoner; and accordingly, close behind the vacant row of first chairs filed in the next most important people, showing perhaps a little too plainly by their demeanour that in this light they considered themselves.

Emily had of course the post of honour, and the happy Herbert was only too proud to explain to her, leaning over the back of the chairs in front to do so, all his fears, hopes, and surmises. She was not to have him all to herself, however: he had to attend to Mrs Tufnell's beckoning fan, to assure her that the draught which had found out her rheumatic shoulder would disappear once the room was full and the doors closed, and beg to be allowed to draw up her fur cloak until that desirable end was accomplished; while even Mary liked to have a word with the young lecturer, who was *the* person for the time, and who did not take it amiss when she declared that the best flower-pots were all on Emily's side.

They were early and had some time to wait, but that did not distress anybody. They had come to be early, to fill the room, to form a basis, as it were, upon which the superstructure was to be built, and their good-humour and obligingness never flagged, needing only Herbert's assurances from time to time that all was going on well, and that he would begin directly the first row of seats should be filled. He was in the act of saying this for the third time, when he had to hop smartly out of the way, to make room for the very people expected: and great was

Challoner's relief when these proved to consist only of a couple of elderly dames, a sulky-looking schoolboy whose very collar showed that it had been put on unwillingly, and a demure little girl, more taken up with her curls and her mittens than with any hope of pleasure to be derived from the so-called entertainment; but neither duke nor duchess was there, and it was intimated that they would not be there.

They, at least, would not witness Jem Challoner's position and company, and he was spared the having to be recognised by them and speaking to them, which he had dreaded in spite of himself, and to which every other member of his party had secretly looked forward. Even the head of the family himself—even honest independent William Tufnell—was not so entirely satisfied as he should have been, on finding that the chairs though vacant had been duly paid for; he had not exactly meant *those* chairs, when he had professed indifference as to their occupation or not,—and though he would not have owned for the world to disappointment, he had undoubtedly lost one of the moments in life for which he was about to pay down his thirty thousand pounds! It was hardly playing him fair, and so he felt it.

The lecture, however, went off famously. Those who wearied did not yawn aloud, those who slept did not snore, and those who did not understand believed they did. The majority kept an eye of encouragement on Mr Mildmay, who was, as we have said, a general favourite; the rest ticked off their neighbours, and took patterns of head-dresses, ruffles, and the like. So that nobody was openly in a fidget; and when the whole thing was over, and the pamphlet closed, and there was no more fear of another heart-rending "I will only detain you a *very* few minutes longer," or "I hope I do not weary you, but the subject is so very interesting," when the end had actually come—was not only coming, but had come,—when the



lecturer, with bows of acknowledgment, stepped down from his desk, and the applause was hearty, and portly radiant Mrs Tufnell burst her glove in clapping, and the banker thundered on the floor with his big umbrella, brought on purpose, how charming it all was—for every one but Jem Challoner!

"Such a delightful lecture, Mrs Tufnell!"

"Emily, dear, I do congratulate you."

"Nothing could have gone off better."

"What a full house! Have you looked round?"

"So lucky in the night."

"I am sure, with such numbers here, we shall never get a cab; we shall have to walk home."

"How many do you think we came? Three cabs full."

It seemed as if the whole room now pressed round and encircled the Tufnells, to whom this was due; as if from every quarter they were the centre of attraction, and people whom Challoner in his ignorance had been looking upon as—well, as very good townsfolk, he had now to be presented to as old friends, and great friends, and neighbours, and near neighbours,—it was "Mary," "Emily," "Bertha," from every one; it was "dear," and "darling," and "love," taps of the fan, pullings of the sleeve, whisplings in the ear, even kissings on the cheek all round, and round, and round. It was terrible; his ears tingled, his jaw fell.

In that quarter of an hour he learned a good deal. When he had before stayed with the Tufnells he had been in mourning, and had made the most of his mourning in order to ensure an immunity from morning calls and solemn dinner-parties. He had guessed what these might be, though his present experience went far beyond what imagination had pictured. Nobody had taken offence. "For indeed it just shows what a kind heart he has," cried the excellent mother. "To be sure there are

few young men in these days that would take on so about an aunt, and an aunt, too, that left him a little bit of money; but that's Jem Challoner all the world over. I do say to papa I never came across any young man that cared less about money. Papa does not think so much of it. When I told him that we were not to have our friends while Jem was with us,—that was when he and Mary were first engaged, you know,—what do you think he said? He just up and says, 'That's one of his aristocratic fads,' says he. Not that he thought any the worse of Jem for it. Papa is an aristocrat at heart."

So it was only now that the full fruition of what he had done dawned on the ill-fated Challoner—only now, now when he could least bear it, now when he could most appreciate it. Fresh from Overton, with all its exquisite simplicity and unconscious harmony, he had, without even the interval of a few weeks, or a few days, to encounter his cup of fate with all its dread ingredients.

He was very miserable; he had never been so miserable in his life.

And then, just as he was standing up, bowing and smiling,—forced by the awful exigency of the moment to bow and smile,—while standing there, a spectacle to gods and men, with a drawn grin upon his withered countenance, and an angry light in his soft eye, he caught sight, in the very midst of the motley assemblage, of a face he knew.

## CHAPTER XX.

## THE STRUGGLE.

" Shall I to Honour, or to Love give way ?

For, as bright day, with black approach of night,  
Contending makes a doubtful puzzling light,  
So does my Honour and my Love together  
Puzzle me so, I can decide on neither."

—SPENSER.

The face belonged to Miss Juliet Appleby, the Juliet whom at Overton Challoner had found a bore, a would-be flirt, and an incorrigible giggler, but who now in the elegance of her wrap, and the propriety of her demeanour, looked provokingly refined and superior. Apparently Miss Appleby knew how to behave in public, whatever licence she might give herself in private; and Challoner, watching in order to avoid her, could not help having yet another drop added to the bitterness of his reflections, in noting that even this little miss, this absurd Juliet who had been totally put out of sight, distanced, eclipsed, and set at naught when Matilda had been on the scene, now found a foil for herself in the women of his own party.

Oddly enough this was the first thing to occur to him, but it was soon swallowed up in another and more appalling second thought. Juliet here, on his track, likely, nay sure to meet him and speak to him any day and any moment—for the first introduction at Overton had been followed by others, and there was now quite an easy acquaintanceship between the two,—what should he do or say, should he be attacked, questioned, and called upon to give an account of himself? Moreover, not only was such an interview to be anticipated, but once seen, she would hear from others, must hear from some one, what

had brought him to this place, and hearing meant telling again. The very thought of that telling again sent a shiver through his veins, since whatever the future might have in store for him it could have nothing worse than that Matilda should know all, and know it through another.

His only hope lay in being unseen, and in the possibility of Miss Appleby's hosts—for of course she was on a visit somewhere about,—of their living so far in the country as to be ignorant of town gossip. The Tufnells undoubtedly reigned supreme in Clinkton; there they were the great among the small, the lions among the asses, the best, the very best of their set. But Clinkton confined itself pretty much to Clinkton; the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, as of old; and even though the friends of Miss Appleby might be known to Challoner himself, they might not have any acquaintance with the banker's family, and might not refer to the engagement, having no reason for supposing it would interest their guest.

Certainly Juliet had never heard him speak of Clinkton. Certainly, unless she actually saw him there with her own eyes, she had no clue by which she could connect him with the place. Lady Fairleigh was away, the whole Challoner family were away; he might escape, he might even yet escape,—but should she see him, all was over.

His eye never left the slim figure which in its spare sharpness of youthful outline had moved an inward smile and comparison at Overton, until he saw it pass through the curtained doorway; and grateful now for the press of human beings which had been so distasteful before, he welcomed every detaining introduction, and made the most of every stoppage.

The consequence was all that could be desired; when at length he emerged from the lecture-room, the coast

was clear. It was best, Mrs Tufnell said, to let the carriage people get away first, and she hoped Mr Jem had not minded their remaining a little behind the great crush, but they had so many friends—he must see how many friends they had—and everybody wanted to have a word, and it would have been uncivil to hurry off,—but now she was ready, quite ready; and then followed farewells and nods, and shawling and muffling, followed by the brisk walk home, and the promised supper. And a goodly supper it was, in honour of the occasion,—and every one was joyous and mirthful, and Herbert changed the plates and drew the corks as deftly as he had ever traversed the vales of Palestine; and it was well on towards twelve o'clock ere the ladies retired, and those who were not staying in the house took their leave.

“You and I will have a cigar by ourselves, Jem,” said Mr Tufnell then. “Help yourself, and pass the bottle. Heigho! I am tired. So are you, I can see. Well, we shall be good company for one another. I am sick of jabbering.”

And in the quiet hour that followed, the best part of the old man's heart and mind stole gently into view.

He had bidden his daughters “Good night” with a hearty “God bless ye, lassies,” and had straitly charged them to sit up no longer, and not to oversleep themselves in the morning as the result of turning the house upside down at that hour of the night; and when they had gone, and the last rustle of their departing steps had died away, the smile left his ruddy cheek also, and a thoughtful gravity took its place, and out of the depths of his soul, out of the fulness of an honest, upright, overflowing heart, he intrusted to his solitary auditor secret thoughts and feelings that were to Challoner's excited imagination almost holy as compared with his own.

He had never felt himself so vile. He got away at last; got away to his own room, turned out the light,

threw up the window, and blessed the midnight airs upon his aching brow. At last he was alone—free for a brief interval from that dreadful kindness, that intolerable unsuspiciousness; no longer obliged to force the cold caress and the hypocritical smile, and wonder how long such coldness and hypocrisy could escape observation.

He had seen the grey-haired parent's eye moisten, and heard his voice falter, and he might have to see and hear the same again,—but for the moment he had escaped.

He leaned out of the window; his great frame relaxed heavily, and his face worked as it would.

The following morning saw the result of the inward struggle.

"Why—what—what now?" cried Mr Tufnell, with his breath wellnigh driven out of his lips by astonishment. "Why, what is the meaning of this, James Chalonner? You want to marry Mary off-hand? You, that I thought was content to wait a hundred years if so be as we thought right! What—what—what? Bless me! I don't understand this sort of thing, that's what I don't. Marry Mary off-hand! Marry her straight away! But how the devil is a girl to be married straight away that has never heard a word about it till this very moment? And just before Christmas too! I never heard of such a thing. 'Pon my word, I never did. Why, we never have anything at Christmas, saving its a hop for the youngsters, or a dinner or two for the old cronies. Christmas? Nobody gets married at Christmas. Christmas is not the time for private concerns like marrying, in my opinion. It's—it's almost profanity, that's what it is, to think of such a thing. We keep Christmas with our friends, with our neighbours, with all England, with all Christendom, with the world——" his voice rising higher and higher, "ay, and perhaps beyond it, Jem, my lad," dropping down again. "Yes," after a moment's pause, — "yes,

Christmas is a great public festival, a—great—public festival,” pleased with the phrase; “and you and Mary—for I take it she has had a hand in this——?” inquiringly.

“Indeed, no. I have not spoken to Mary about it.”

“And that’s right; and don’t you speak to her—no good will come of speaking to her. Why, man, I am not angry with you; it’s natural enough, natural enough—but it don’t suit my ideas. Now you see, you and I get on first-rate; you have never crossed me, and I have never crossed you—and I don’t want,” with emphasis, “I don’t want to be obliged to cross you. I’ll give in a little, d’ye see?” relenting as the young man remained silent, and it was to be presumed something daunted if not convinced. “I’ll give in a bit. I’ll meet you half-way, so to speak. Let me see, this is December, mid-December; well, we’ll say February, if you like; the end of February. Eh? Will that do? Come, I had not meant it to be before Easter. I thought Easter would have done very well; but as it seems no, why, there is nothing for it but to give in with a good grace. We’ll jostle up the parsons, and tell ’em, Lent or no Lent, we must have their services by the end of February.”

“Would——” said Challoner, and got no further; but his hesitating face and tone betrayed dissatisfaction. Having nerved himself for the sacrifice, he felt he scarcely knew what—probably afraid to trust his own resolution for a second effort.

“What! you ain’t content yet?” exclaimed Mr Tufnell, half amused and half indignant. “Well, I’ll be jiggered! I never thought any one would ha’ got as much out of me as you have got—you, Jem Challoner—and still you look as sour as corked claret. What the deuce—I’m not a swearing man, but I will say it—what the deuce is the meaning of this?”

“The meaning?” said Challoner, slowly. He felt he

was cutting but a sorry figure, and could only wonder how he had been fool enough not to expect and prepare for opposition before. But the truth was, that so occupied had he been with his own aspect of the affair, that no sooner was his resolution made up, for better for worse, to fulfil his engagement, and to think no more of beautiful Matilda Wilmot, than he had, in his own mind, almost gone through the ceremony, taken on himself the vows, and looked on the whole thing as complete, before ever he had opened the subject. He had never had any clear idea as to why the marriage had not taken place earlier; he knew he had not cared about it sufficiently to press the point; he had been disappointed in Miss Tufnell, and had been depressed in spirit on his introduction to her home and its surroundings: but he had fancied this uneasiness would wear off in time—that he and Mary would jog along comfortably enough, as many another couple did,—and had accordingly been entirely in the Tufnells' hands. If they had been eager for the union to take place, well and good; as they had not been eager, well and good also. But he had certainly deemed that only a slight pressure on his part was needed to bring it about as soon as he chose. He was now confused and disconcerted: a lover's flame he could scarcely pretend to, and no other plea offered.

"Well, I don't know what you are up to—hang me if I do!" ejaculated Tufnell, after a pause, in which he had scanned his companion narrowly. "The ways of men are as queer as the ways of women sometimes. You are not taking offence, are you?" he broke off sharply. "Of course, if I am giving offence"—and the old gentleman drew himself up, and the colour gathered on his cheek.

"Not at *all*!" said Challoner, earnestly. And yet, oh what it would have been to have seized that momentary gleam, fanned it, poured oil upon the fire, and broken at once and for altogether with the Tufnell family in violence



and wrath! Pah! He hated himself for the fiend's suggestion. It had been easy enough—comparatively easy at least—when two hundred miles lay between him and his betrothed, to think of his engagement as a cruel fetter which had been laid upon him almost by a trick, and almost against his will,—and he had felt less and less bound by it as Matilda grew more and more dear: even at the outset the struggle had not been maintained beyond a certain point, and he had given way, a long long way afterwards; but he had never, even whilst enduring trouble and dismay himself, realised, until he re-entered the homely circle the day before, all that a suspicion of his faithlessness would bring upon them, these people, so good and kind and true,—it had come upon him like a revelation in the dark watches of the night before. He could not, no, he could not, be more base than he had already been; and he set his teeth, and crushed down the hope that sprang up within, and reared its wicked head to look him in the face, when he marked the blush of anger on the father's cheek.

"Not at *all*!" he said, in accents that carried immediate conviction.

Mr Tufnell was mollified instantly. "Well, well, well!" he cried; "I did not think it—not for a moment: but young men are so peppery, one never knows——"

"I am not a young man, sir," said Jem Challoner, quietly.

"Not a young man? What are you, then? A Methuselah, I suppose? Come, come, you are out of sorts to-day. That business last night, that supper and nonsense, did not suit you. No more it did me. I like my meals regular; and nothing is worse than eating at odd times—snacks here and snacks there; and a supper at ten o'clock at night plays the very fury with a man's digestion. Did you have the lobster?" suddenly. "That's it! That's done it! Depend upon it, lobster will find

you out, and make you pay damages. I would as soon eat the leather off my boot as touch a claw of a lobster at bed-time. And now I must really be off: I—let me see—where are those papers? Is it settled for February, then? Are you going to be a reasonable man?"

"I—I ought to be ashamed to—but—but——," stammered Challoner, with inward resolution to have it out, whatever might be the result. "You are very good, exceedingly good; but—but——,"

"But, but," good-humouredly mimicked the banker. "Ay, that's it; there is always a 'but, but.' Well, here comes the old lady; we'll ask her what she has to say to it. Come, old lady, and tackle this refractory gentleman; he is too much for me; I haven't a chance with him. What do you think he wants now?—and that the very day after he arrives! And I that thought him a very model of patience and everything! Now he cries out that he must marry Mary off-hand! Ay, I thought that would make you jump. And so I am just telling him it can't be done."

"Why can't it be done?" said Challoner, turning to her. "There is no real reason, I presume, why there should be any delay. I am not taking your daughter far away; London is far away from no place. And as for preparations——"

"That's it; that's the thing, of course—the preparations. Why, my dear Mr Jem,—but, to be sure, I don't know how soon you mean," said she. "If you mean in six weeks, or maybe a month——"

"Aha! But he don't mean that; that would not suit his books at all. He means three weeks, or a fortnight; I believe it would have been one week, or to-morrow, with a word of encouragement. Now? What do you tell me now?" cried the husband, delighted to inflict his own previous discomfiture on his partner. "I believe he sees no earthly reason why he and Mary should not be spliced

before noon to-morrow morning. It's too late to-day, luckily. Ha! ha! ha! And then he says Mary has not put him up to it on the sly," poking with his finger to point the jeer. "Tell that to the marines, young sir. She may not have *said* anything,—there is no need for *saying* sometimes; there are ways and means without *saying*. You and she understand each other, I'll be bound."

"Ask her," said Challoner, quickly. His ear had caught a voice outside the door, and he opened it from within just as his betrothed was about to do the same from without. "Ask her. She does not even know my wishes; and I," he added, with his eyes on the ground—"I do not even know if she shares them."

"Wishes! What about?" inquired Mary, briskly. "What is going on here? La, Jem, what a face! I declare you look as if you were going to a funeral. What is the matter, you people?"

"A funeral, indeed!" cried her father, with a laugh. "'Tis not a funeral, but a wedding that's in the case, my girl. However, if a man is permitted to look glum when he is going to a funeral, he may, I suppose, give a scowl or so when he is *not* going to a wedding. *That* is what is the matter, miss. What have you to say to that?"

"Oh, indeed! A wedding? What wedding, papa?"

"It could not be his own, my dear, could it?"

"Indeed he does not look like it, papa."

"Indeed I was saying so, Mary."

"Come, come, you two; come, stop your nonsense, and give Jem his answer," put in Mrs Tufnell, good-humouredly. "'Tis but papa's way, Jem, you know—he must always have his joke; but 'enough's as good as a feast,' say I, and it is not fair to take a joke on too far. Tell Mary what Jem says, and then she will understand. And, papa, don't you bias her, but just let her speak for herself."

"But, mind, I don't promise to go by what she says, whether she speaks for herself or not," rejoined the father, sturdily. "Howsomever, Mary—well, the fact is—I suppose you want to marry Mr Challoner here?"

"Papa! what a question!" and Miss Tufnell looked roguishly at her lover.

"Well—'papa,' indeed! I said I supposed you did. Now, the thing is, will you have him now, or wait till you get him?"

He was irrepressible. He was in reality by no means displeased by what had occurred, as must have been already obvious; he was more, he was flattered and gratified beyond what he would have allowed to any one; only he meant to have his own way, and to have it with a blast of trumpets which should proclaim to all his victory.

He now exploded into a hearty laugh at his own wit, and Mrs Tufnell had again to tap and admonish. "Fie, fie! Now, papa, you really are too bad. I always do say that when papa gets into this joky humour, he really is too bad," apologetically to the silent stern man at the other end of the table. "Papa is a regular tease; and now poor Mary does not know what to think. I see I must take it in hand myself. It is whether you would like to have the wedding soon or by-and-by, Mary, my dear?"

"Soon? How soon, mamma?"

"Why, by the middle or end of next month—in about five weeks—or—or——" said Mrs Tufnell, stealing a suggestive glance across the table.

"In a fortnight, or less," replied Challoner, in a harsh resonant voice.

They all looked at him as he spoke. His tone was not like a bridegroom's.

"A fortnight! Good gracious!" ejaculated Miss Tufnell, throwing up her hands. "My dear Jem! Mamma, do *you* tell him. Papa, you know you said it could not

be," appealing to each in turn. "Why, I haven't ordered a *thing* yet—not a single thing. And now—oh, you don't know—but now it could never be, it could not possibly be, not for ever so long. I have heard such news; I was rushing in full cry to tell you all—I nearly ran all the way home, for I said I would be the first to get it out," the panting girl exclaimed, almost choking in her eagerness, as the rapture and excitement which had been momentarily suspended on her entrance by the introduction of another topic, now returned in full tide. (She did not see Jem raise his eyes, look at her, and drop them again, while the lines about his mouth seemed to deepen every moment. Neither she nor either of the others saw, all being otherwise engaged.) "Don't you wonder what it is?" cried the speaker, twirling round and round in a pirouette. "Guess, guess, guess, all of you. Try to guess any way, for you'll never do it. Oh my, I am in such a state! The others are writing off for patterns in the sitting-room now. Patterns! Doesn't *that* tell you. Patterns; what do people need patterns for? A—fancy—dress—" looking at each in turn.

"Ball!" cried her mother, solving the conundrum. "Ball! You don't say it?"

"But I do. That's it. There, it's out. Mrs Dobb is going to give a fancy-dress ball. And it has only just been arranged; and it is fixed for this day fortnight."

"That settles the question," said her father, drily.

"You cannot compete with a fancy ball, Mr Jem, you see," added his wife. "The girls have all been just wild to go to one; and though, for myself, I am not so fond of being made a guy, still I'll not deny that for once and away I don't mind at Christmas time. 'Tis a pretty sight. And the Dobbs being our own particular friends——"

"Oh, ay, you'll want to go, no doubt," put in Mr Tuf-

nell, affecting a fine shade of fatherly contempt, "'The Dobbs being our particular friends.' If the Dobbs had been our particular enemies, it would have been all the same to you. You must be on the gad-about——"

"Now, now," began she.

"Oh, papa, hold your tongue, and mamma too." (Again Challoner raised his eyes; the tone was not meant to be disrespectful, but it was,—he could not tell what it was. Never before had he seen his bride-elect show to less advantage; it might have been done of set purpose to mock him.) "Just you both be quiet, and I'll tell you about it," proceeded the young lady. "It has been on their minds this great while, Mrs Dobb says; but they knew it would make such an upset in the house, that they could never quite bring themselves to fix a time. But now Willie Dobb says it *is* to be; for he is *determined* upon it, and you know he can always do anything he likes with them all, once he is *determined*. And so when we met them, they began about it *at once*, and said they wanted us to know before any one else, because we *must* be there,—and if there had been anything to stop us, they would have changed the day. Mrs Dobb herself said that; she did indeed. 'Mary,' she said, 'tell your mother that if you could not all have come on *our* day, we would have changed the day.' So you see, papa, it was a shame to say it would have been all one if it had been our enemies. The Dobbs are always——"

"Just what I said. And no one knows it better than papa," subjoined her mother. "But he never meant nothing, Mary,"—her own phraseology suffering from excitement and anticipation. "And Mary," eagerly, "what is Mrs Dobb going to wear herself? What is she going to *be*? Did you hear that? Did she tell you that? For I do declare I would not for the world that we should clash, she and I; and as we are the same stout figure, we

might as like as not go and pitch on the very same thing. We must agree about it."

"You must agree to differ, eh?" said her husband, jocosely. "Eh, Jem? that wasn't bad, eh? Agree to differ. Hum—— Eh? Your nose is pretty well put out of joint by this, my friend, I take it. No one would give a thought to the bride, you see, if there were sham brides, Amazons, gipsies, what not, on the *tapis* as well. Mary is not going to lose the show either. Catch her being married and done for, and carted out of the way, when there is any jollification going on. No, no; not such a flat."

"I really couldn't, Jem," pleaded Mary, pitcously.

"I suppose I ought not to ask it," said Challoner, with a bitter smile.

"Well, well; there's no harm done,—and don't quarrel over it you two," interposed Mrs Tufnell, a shade of anxiety showing itself in her voice as she looked at the last speaker. "Mary means no harm, Mr Jem; but she is just a girlie, and likes her play. You will enjoy the ball yourself. Dear me! it has put *me* all in a flutter. I will tell you what I will do, Mary," turning briskly to her daughter. "I will just step down to Mrs Dobb after lunch, before she can get out for the afternoon, and beg her to take it for granted that I shan't be in her way whatever she decides on. That will be doing it handsome; and as it is Mrs Dobb who gives the ball, it is only fair that she should have first choice. And papa," to him, "you will not be stingy to the girls, you know. It is only once and away; we don't get the chance of a fancy ball every day, and fancy ball dresses are not to be had for nothing. Is the day quite fixed, fixed for certain, Mary?"

"Mrs Dobb was going to get the cards printed this very afternoon," said Mary.

"This very afternoon! The cards printed! Lor'!

that does make it real. And she will be ordering her own dress, the next thing; as sure as I say it, she will,—and indeed I must see to my own, if ever Miss Flaxen is to send it in time. I'll not wait till the afternoon, I'll go now. There is plenty of time, if I go at once——” and she was hurrying away.

“I am to understand that you—that you would prefer to wait, then?” said Challoner to his betrothed,—and, in spite of every effort, his voice trembled under the variety of his emotions. “Is it so? Have I understood aright?”

“Why, of course; how could you have understood awrong?” retorted the young lady, with her usual vivacity. “Pray, Jem, don't say any more about it,” added she, pettishly. “What is the use? You see father doesn't want it; no more does mother; no more do I. And I don't believe,” with returning good temper,—“I don't believe you, in your heart of hearts, really want it yourself.”

“Bravo! Mary. Did you hear that, mamma?” cried her father.

Challoner bowed; he could not speak. Once more fate had checkmated him, and the thing that he would have done he could not.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### ABSENCE.

“Love reckons hours for months, and days for years,  
And every little absence is an age.”

—DRYDEN.

“I am ten times undone, while hope, and fear,  
And grief, and rage, and love rise up at once,  
And with variety of pain distract me.”

—ADDISON.

Life in a country town is not surcharged with variety or incident, and can scarcely be called even soberly



amusing, unless one has a special taste for shopping, dawdling, dropping in and out of neighbours' houses, and picking up chit-chat at one tea-table to be retailed at another.

It must be said for Clinkton that it boasted some advantages over other places of the kind, in the possession of a cathedral and of a river; and the cathedral had produced for the Tufnells Herbert Mildmay, while the river had been the resource of Jem Challoner. He was now, however, debarred from even that, since the season was unpropitious, while the cathedral did as little for him in its way. He refused to enter it, and was wondered at, hinted at, had his reasons demanded, and his remissness held up to view. Did he object to week-day services? If so, he must not say so before Emily,—but did he? He let them think he did; he let them think almost anything they chose of him, so long as no one suspected a deeper and tenderer objection. Had he not but the other day sat by Matilda's side in the old church at Seaburgh, and had they not listened together to the grave quaint music, and afterwards knelt side by side, knelt and prayed,—and he was not a man—God forgive him—who often prayed,—but he had felt something like this,—if that woman there, that pure, good, beautiful woman, to whom his soul cleaved, if she might only be his, his to help him to a better life, his to lead him onward and upward, he would—and he had made a vow in his heart, and fancied for the moment it must have been heard and accepted in heaven? To go next with Mary Tufnell? With Mary on the one hand, and Emily or Bertha on the other? He could not do it.

So Emily, poor thing, had to go alone, since Bertha gave out distinctly that as it was plain she had to be gooseberry to somebody, she must say she preferred it should be to Jem and Mary; for though Jem was not a lively bird by any means, still he had the pull of Herbert

in one way—he was not for ever running round to walk on Mary's side, and opening doors for Mary, and buying presents for Mary, asking Mary if she were tired, and all the rest of it. Herbert made a regular dolly of Emily: Bertha never had the umbrella held over *her*, though it might be that she wore her best hat and Emily her everyday one; she had no nice boxes of goodies slipped into her muff; and she might be on the trudge from morning till night wherever Emily chose to go, without once being asked what she would like or dislike doing.

But Jem, Bertha averred, was a good old chap, and drew no such distinctions.

Indeed, whatever the party was, it was the same to Challoner. He walked and talked indiscriminately, he never bought anything for anybody, and he carried Bertha's largest parcel in addition to Mary's smallest, without any apparent consciousness as to which was which.

In consequence he was a dear; and as he made no parley over whatever he was asked to do, never had an engagement, never sought out an excuse—as he submitted to be dragged from house to house with never a remonstrance, and to be kept waiting at shop or rink with never a murmur—he was presently the best of dears.

“And I do say the way that poor Jem is put upon—I shouldn't stand if I was he,” cried his stanch protectress Mrs Tufnell. “It is Jem here and Jem there with all of you, till I declare I am quite ashamed. If it was only Mary now, there would be sense in that. But Bertha harries him here, and Emily harries him there——”

“Harries! What to goodness do you mean, mamma?”

“——You know what I mean well enough.”

“——There's no such word.”

“You know what I *mean* well enough; what does the word matter? I say it's a sin and a shame to keep that poor dear standing about in all the cold doorways in

this weather, while you girls are amusing yourselves inside——”

“He won't come inside; it is his own fault; he will stop in the doorways.”

“That's nonsense: that's just him all over; he thinks he'll be in the way. There he was to-day—— oh, I saw you all—I saw *you*, though none of you saw me—and there he was half an hour at Smith's door if he was a minute. I went by when you three walked up, and saw you—you, Bertha, and Mary go in, and Jem turn back and lean against the wall outside; and when I came back—and I had been away a good half-hour, for I could not have got to the Greens and back in less—he was there still. Now, if it had only been for five minutes or so, shop-windows are well enough for a little while, but—— I was saying shop-windows are diverting enough in their way, Mr Jem,” as Challoner entered, “but I doubt the girls give you too much of them. I like to flatten my nose now and again myself, but I never get a chance nowadays; there's so much to be done, and papa likes to keep the horses going. That's the worst of horses; I am sure I don't care to drive, drive, drive every day of my life; I'd as soon stop indoors to look after things sometimes. But papa says the horses and James are best out; and the girls are none of them for the carriage—it's not amusing for young people; they can't see their friends, leastways stop and chat and look about them, as they can when they are on their feet; so I have just got into the way of it, and James comes round every day at two o'clock regularly.”

“Jem had better drive with you, mamma, if you think it would be more to his taste than being with us,” suggested Jem's *fiancée* with ready pertness. “No doubt your society would divert him much more than ours.”

“We don't want him if he don't want us,” added her sister.

"And as to our keeping him at the shop-doors, it was about his own errand we were in at Smith's; he will not take any sort of trouble about it himself——"

"About what?"

"His Turk's dress; his dress for the ball. He is going as a Turk. We have settled it for him; we think he will make a lovely Turk. Do be quiet, Jem; I'm not saying it's you that is lovely. And the ball is coming on, and yet he has never given the order!"

"But you have given it?"

"No, indeed. I only went in to see Smith on the sly. Jem never knew what I was about until this moment," looking at him to see the effect; "and Smith says he could manage it perfectly, if Jem would only go and speak himself."

"Well, he must go then—go at once," cried her mother, won over to the enemy directly. "Dear me, Mr Jem! what have you been about? Lord! you may be thrown out altogether! Why now, do look about you, and don't leave it to the last, as you men always do. I met Willie Dobb just now, and for all he was the one to set the ball agoing, he makes believe now that he is too great a gentleman to know anything about it. Says I to him, 'Well, Mr Willie, and what are you to be?' 'Oh, Mrs Tufnell,' says he, as grand as you please, 'I haven't made up my mind yet,' he says. 'I shall just leave it to my tailor,' says he. Leave it to his tailor! a likely story! By-and-by it leaks out that he has got it all as pat as ninepence. 'I may have something of this kind,' he says—but I am sure I forget what kind; and though he is so fine and so fashionable, I'll be bound Willie Dobb has thought of little else but what he can do to set himself off since ever the ball was first talked about."

"I wish Jem would," said Mary. "He only laughs, and says if the worst comes to the worst, he can wear a mask."

("He wears that already," said Challoner, under his breath.) "Oh, don't you fear, don't you fear," responded the easy mother; "Jem is just tantalising you for a bit of mischief. He and Willie Dobb are a couple. The end will be that the two of them will turn out the smartest there."

"I met Walter Moss to-day,—what do you think he is going as?" said Bertha. "You will never guess. Richard Cœur-de-Lion, in a complete suit of chain-armour. He says he ordered it the very day he got his invitation. Think of Walter Moss as Richard Cœur-de-Lion!"

"Think of the cost of it!" said her mother. "Well, I am not one to grudge money—and to be sure the Mosses are rolling, as one may say; but that chain-armour—and he would never think of having it on hire. Well, well," nodding her head. "And what is Charlotte to be, Bertha?"

"A haymaker, with a rake and a basket. And won't she look like one? With her red face——"

"——Come, come, no ill-nature; we are all in the same boat," said Mrs Tufnell, comfortably; "and a red face is what every haymaker gets with working in the sun. Charlotte is very sensible not to be above the character. I was afraid of what Charlotte might do, to own the truth. Mary, Queen of Scots, or suchlike."

"Miss Beadel is to be Mary, Queen of Scots, you know. Charlotte could not run in couples with Miss Beadel."

"Miss Beadel, Mary, Queen of Scots!" cried her mother, upsetting in her amazement her tea into her saucer, and by a violent lunge just saving further mischance. "My word! Bertha, you are hoaxing. Ain't you, then? Well, I wouldn't have believed it. Ridiculous creature; and at her age too! As yellow as a guinea, and as lean as a fiddle-string! Set her up with a velvet dress and pearls!"

"It is her old velvet that is to be made to do," said

Bertha, giggling. "And she says *that* is why she has chosen the character. She is going to cut down the neck——"

"——Humph!" from her mother.

"And put in hanging sleeves of muslin——"

"——Ay, they are cheap enough."

"And work in the pearls herself—old Roman pearls that she has lying by. And she has got a wire frame to stand up at the back, and it is to be covered with muslin and pearls to match; like the photograph, you know. She has the photograph in front of her to work by, and she is really doing it very well."

"And what about the head? The head is the touch. She is never going to make up the cap herself?"

"Indeed she is then. And I have promised to look in and tell her how it does when it is finished," said Bertha, with all the family good-nature. "She is not going to have a stitch put into anything by anybody but herself; and she reckons the whole thing will only cost her fifteen shillings, gloves and all."

"And me paying half as much again in guineas! But however," said Mrs Tufnell, recovering—"however, I am not Martha Beadel; and as I have a husband who stints me for nothing,—for I will say that for papa, he has been handsome to us all this time,—well, I'll not disgrace him. 'Tis all very well for Martha Beadel to cut and chop her old gowns and try to make them pass for new ones; but it would be a pretty thing if I were to play that trick. Don't you tell papa, girls, whatever you do," in alarm; "do you hear that, Mary? Don't you let out to papa about Miss Beadel getting nothing new for the ball: we should never hear the last of it."

"Papa is quite as full of his own appearance as other people," said Mary. "Everybody is but Jem," with a glance of resentment. "Every one takes an interest in it; and the Dobbs are so beset with requests for invita-

tions, from people wanting to bring other people, that Mrs Dobb says it is of no use—their rooms cannot go on stretching for ever; and though they are going to turn every stick of furniture out of the place, and use all the down-stairs rooms, they cannot take in another soul. There is a Miss Juliet Appleby——”

An involuntary movement from Challoner.

“Oh, you know her, Jem?”

“I have—have met her; ycs. I know *a* Miss Appleby at least; it may not be the same.”

“Was her name Juliet?”

“Juliet?” He looked as though trying to recollect, and blushed for himself as he did so.

“Well, was she a friend of the Windlasses—those people your sister knows?”

“The people my sister knows. Really,” said Challoner, affecting to laugh, “really that is rather a wide surface to work upon. I know the Windlasses a little myself; but I did not know they were acquainted with Miss Appleby, nor that she was here with them,” which was true enough.

This was his first intimation as to where Juliet was, since, although he had come across her once or twice after the lecture, he had not been obliged to speak. He did not think she had seen him. Once indeed they had almost touched each other beneath an archway, and as by chance he had been alone, he had almost made himself known for the purpose of discovering how much or how little she had learned about him. But the stake was too high; he had hung back, and let her walk along in front of him—only a few feet in front of him—for a quarter of a mile, leaving it to chance whether they should fall foul of each other or not. Chance had elected that they should not, that time.

Then, again, he had seen her step out of a brougham and enter a shop—the next shop to one in whose door-

way he was waiting as usual—and he had thought Juliet could hardly have avoided seeing and recognising him on that occasion ; but she had : she had passed inside, and ere she had emerged again he had vanished. The third glimpse had been merely of the top of her bonnet. But he had remembered the bonnet as having been one which Matilda had noticed and had not admired. Teddy had defended poor Juliet's tawdry taste ; but Teddy's defence was never good for much, and Challoner had joined in the laugh : now the sight of the sprightly plume in the streets of Clinkton sent a throb to his heart.

He had almost grown callous as to the proximity of Juliet herself ; that she had not her stopping-place anywhere close at hand had soon been obvious, and he could have heard with satisfaction that she was with the old-fashioned out-of-the-way Windlasses, had it not been for this insufferable fancy ball.

"Well, she wants an invitation now," said Mary. "The Dobbs and the Windlasses do not visit. Mrs Dobb says she does not know why she is sure, but they never have left cards on each other, and so, of course, she had never thought of asking them. But this Miss Appleby is dying to be there on Friday. So she has got the Greens to ask for her, and she is to come with their party."

"Provided Mrs Dobb will have her, I suppose."

"Oh, Mrs Dobb makes an exception in her favour, of course," said Mary, laughing. "Mrs Dobb will go on making exceptions for a good while yet, you may be sure. And she is as proud as possible of being so run upon ; she would not turn away a sweep, let alone Miss Juliet Appleby !"

"Harry Swilly is going as a Chinaman," began Bertha. It was endless. Cold and raw as the day was, Challoner went out of doors again ; he really could not stand more at one time.



## CHAPTER XXII.

## CHALLONER PLAYS HIS PART.

"If, when she appears i' the room,  
Thou dost not quake, art not struck dumb,  
And in striving this to cover  
Dost not speak thy words twice over,—  
                    Know this,  
                    Thou lov'st amiss,  
And to love true,  
Thou must begin again, and love anew."

—SIR JOHN SUCKLING.

Nothing was now heard of but the fancy ball from morning till night. Everybody professed curiosity and anxiety as regarded the dresses and characters chosen by their friends, and everybody had a very real and unaffected interest in, and desire to make known, their own.

"What are you to wear? What are you to be?" was the inevitable first question, followed by a careless "Very pretty. Very nice. That will just suit you. *I* am going as——," entering into the minutest details. No age nor sex was exempt from the infection; no one was too old or too young, or too wise or too fine (excepting Willie Dobb, and even Mrs Tufnell saw through him), to care how they went, and how they looked. Heads of families—sober, grey-headed men, who would have to pay the bill afterwards—might indeed put out their lips and raise their eyebrows, but they went and got measured all the same, and did not above half like being told that the fly-away coat-tails and tight breeches in the corner were for the *young* gentlemen, and that something more suitable would be forthcoming for them; whilst their portly spouses whispered merrily behind fans, spread their fingers to show the breadth of the lace on their trains, and threw up their eyes in describing the height of the plumes that were to nod upon their powdered curls.

It appeared that there were to be two Harry the Eighths, three ill-fated Marys of Scotland, a Joan of Arc, a Cleopatra, a William Penn, several Puritans, and at least half-a-dozen Vivandières. "And what do you think those barrack gimcracks are going to do?" cried Tufnell, in disgust indescribable. "Going in their uniform! In *their* uniform! The uniform of the 150th, if you please. And Mrs Dobb may lay her account to it that every one of the hundred and fifty of them will be there, now that it is not to cost them so much as a clean shirt. It is a clever get-out, isn't it, Challoner? Poor devils! they haven't a brass farthing among 'em."

Mary Tufnell had in duty bound consulted her Jem on the all-important subject. He had been in luck: he had chanced to remember a dress that had struck his fancy on a similar occasion, and by describing it,—a plain black gown, with white cap, apron, and collar, and red cross on the left arm—the costume of a hospital nurse, in short,—he had been saved further discussion; for "What do you think she did?" cried her delighted mother, afterwards; "she just went and ordered it straight away, and surprised him with it on in the drawing-room! I'm bound to say it's neat; but 'tis scarce dressy enough, to my taste. If one is to be dressed up, you know—but, however, if it pleases Jem. And was it not nice of Mary? And Jem has hit off her pretty back and waist for certain. Herbert, now, could not think of anything but a Dolly Varden for poor Emily. I call that common. And papa standing treat for the girls, and ready to pay anything, as it will be the last time—for two of them any way. They should have been allowed to get something better than Dolly Vardens out of papa."

But though the accidental mention of an effective costume did something for Challoner's reputation, and just saved him from being said to take *no* interest in the event of the day—and though this suggestion was, we

may add, assiduously circulated in the circle as an apology for Mary's plainness, and also out of justice to papa, added Mrs Tufnell,—still he might have been in disgrace again soon enough, had it not been for what he had just heard regarding Juliet Appleby. Within twenty-four hours after learning her intentions, he had given strict and lavish orders about his own dress. It was to be made at once, and made in the best style, and all past remissness was condoned on the spot.

But lest our readers should be under any misapprehension on the subject, we may just inform them aside, that this sudden awakening meant precisely the reverse of what appeared,—that as long as Challoner saw no escape from the dreadful revel—nothing for it but to be led there a captive at the wheels of his fair—the doleful vision so oppressed him, that he was perforce numb and nerveless beforehand; but that no sooner did he resolve *not* to go to the ball—no sooner did he gather himself together to revolt and flee—than he went gaily to the tailor's.

Do not be too hard upon him: he was almost beside himself.

A note had come for him in the morning from Lord Overton—Lord Overton, who scarcely ever asked his sister for a stamp. He had himself written to Challoner, and the missive had arrived at breakfast-time. There had been but a few words:—

“DEAR CHALLONER,—The frost has come at last, and we are keeping the home ponds for you. Come to-morrow, if you can. If not, next day. Yours truly.—OVERTON.”

“Come to-morrow, if you can.” If—you—can?—ay, there was the rub. “To-morrow” was the day on which he got the invitation; and though he had told the writer that such an invitation would bring him at any time, on however short a notice, he had paused until he had heard

about Miss Appleby; then he had ordered his suit. With Overton's note in his pocket he had walked to the shop, done his own errand, and then accompanied the ladies on theirs. He had never been more gentle, more compliant. They had ventured to consult him about the rouge for their cheeks, and the juice wherewith to stain his own skin; and he had responded to every summons, and started up to execute every desire in a way that quite wrung Mrs Tufnell's soft withers, who now frankly allowed that she had never done that poor dear justice before,—no, that she had not; for, much as she had always thought of Mary's Jem, she had just felt, felt a little lately as if he were coming it Willie Dobb over them, and had thought he might have tried to look a little more as if he cared about what pleased them all so much,—and, to be sure, everybody knew that Willie Dobb *did* care, in spite of his fal-la airs; but the worst of Mr Jem was, she really had been afraid he did *not*,—and that was the honest truth. But, dear, now she felt quite reprovèd; and indeed she had owned as much to papa, who had said—what do you think he had said? Why, that he only thought the more of Jem for not being carried away by tomfoolery. “‘Had he been one of those jackanapes of officers,’ says papa—for you know papa never could stand the officers,—‘had he been one of *them*,’ says papa, ‘you would have seen another story.’ Papa is quite mad with them for going in their red coats, poor things; but what else have they got to go in, say I? It is all very well for papa, who has only to put his hand in his pocket,—but we can't all be like him; and, for my part, I think none the worse of the young men for saving a penny. However, Jem pleases papa best, and that is as it should be, you know.”

“I suppose you have heard what they are going to do with me,” said papa himself, presently. “It has come in just now, the finery, and there are no fewer than three

boxes! Three boxes! The half of my dressing-room is taken up with them, and a whipper-snapper of a tailor is coming to-night to see that I am all right. 'Pon my word, I shall feel monstrous queer, I expect. What do you say, eh? How about the Turk? Will you be at home in your filigree? Will you be able to dance?"

"I am not a dancing man. No, I don't suppose I shall be dancing to-morrow night," replied Challoner, looking down with something like a smile on his face, as he made an inward interpretation of the phrase.

"You leave it to the boys and girls? Quite right too. Much room they will get to flounce about in, however, if what young Dobb tells me is true; over a hundred people, and their rooms are very little larger than our own. They have a goodish-sized hall—that will help them. If we go in time to see the rest arrive, that will be the best of the fun, to my fancy. I told Dobb we should be there early; we are old friends of the Dobbs, you know"—(how often had he been told it!)"—"their very oldest friends, I may say. Dobb and I have known each other these thirty years, and there has never been a word between us. You can't say that of all old neighbours. I fancy my girls knew of this ball before anybody else did; the girls and boys have all grown up together, and how we have had no match between 'em," with a laugh, "I don't understand. Saw too much of each other, perhaps. People will say my daughters set their caps higher. You, Mr Challoner, and Herbert Mildmay, are above the Clinkton folks: yes, you are—I don't mind owning it. I'm no truckler; but when a man behaves like a gentleman,—as you have done to me and mine, sir,—an honest, downright, straightforward gentleman,—damn it, I'm not above saying your birth is higher than mine. You did not come after my girl's money, you came after her for herself; so has Herbert come after Emily for herself: I believe in you both, from my soul.

You shall see that I do by-and-by—by-and-by,” rustling with both hands in his pockets. “And as for the Dobbs, why, they are all very well in their way,—very well as neighbours, very well as friends; but between ourselves,” wrinkling up his nose—“between ourselves, Jem Challoner, I am just as well pleased to have it stop there. To be sure, there’s Bertha,” suddenly——

“——What about Bertha?” said Mrs Tufnell, entering.

“Only talking over the ball, my dear,” rejoined he, placidly.

“Arranging how we are to go; are you? Oh, we have thought of that, and Bertha has promised to be dressed and off in time to let the carriage come back again for the other two and Mr Jem;—it is so short a way, the carriage can go back and forward,—and it will come for us, for you and me, last.”

“But we must be in good time,” cried Tufnell, “mind you. I have promised that we shall be in good time; for I have set my heart—ahem—the Dobbs are particularly anxious that we should be the first arrivals, and take up our position among themselves, and see it all. Dobb told me so himself.”

“You see papa is quite full of it,” nodded his spouse to Challoner.

“Oh, pooh! I? I full of it? Nonsense! I—I only care, as it amuses you. I am glad to do the civil thing by the Dobbs, my old friends the Dobbs, as I was telling Jem here just now. I am always glad to see them, they are always glad to see me; but as for their fancy ball, it is neither here nor there. If they choose to give a ball, very well; I have nothing to say; let ’em give it. Dobb knows what the length of his purse is; and if he likes to give his young people a hop, and invites us to join, I, for one, see no harm in it; and though I am an old man, and my dancing days are over——”

“——Oh now, now, we shall see what that means;

oh now, now, don't believe him, Mr Jem," cried his wife, delightedly. "Don't be too sure; I should not be the least bit in the world surprised if papa was asked to open the ball with Mrs Dobb. There! That is what I have thought all along; and you may say what you please, it is in my mind that that is how it is to be. Papa and Mrs Dobb! I am sure I only hope that Mr Dobb will not want me to stand up with him; for really with that great gown—what with the length of it, and the weight of it—I am sure I could never turn a figure."

"Oh come, old lady, you would curtsy with the best of 'em," rejoined her husband, gallantly. "Upon my word I had never thought of it, but I should not wonder in the least if Dobb has this in his head. Either you or one of the girls——"

"Ay, one of the girls would be far better, and so I shall tell him. It would be a compliment to the Windlasses if he were to take out Miss Juliet Appleby."

"And why should they have the compliment?" demanded her husband, somewhat tartly. "The Windlasses have never done anything to merit a compliment from any one of us, so far as I know. It seems to me they hold themselves above us plain folks; and if that's the case, I should show them and their Miss Juliet Appleby that we can do without them. Did you not say that they are not even coming themselves, but are sending this London miss with other people?"

"Is she a London miss, Jem?" inquired his daughter Mary, who had entered a few minutes previously.

"You know her, eh, Jem?" added the father, who had not heard this before; "you know her? Oh! And you know the Windlasses, too, of course? Of course, I forgot. But you'll take no offence; I daresay they are excellent people. I never heard a word against 'em; but socially, you know, socially, they are not my style. You see it differently, of course; you are of their set;

and no doubt they make themselves agreeable enough to you, however high and mighty they may be to us. When Mary is your wife, she will stand by the county folks too, I dare swear," pinching her ear; "but you see, I am a plain man, and if people will take me as I am, I am neighbourly; but if they are too fine for anything but a nod, and a 'How are you?' as if I was their grocer or their baker, and talk of nothing but the *weather* when they come to the bank, and won't visit me in my own house, nor know my wife and daughters, why, I don't like it, and I don't pretend to like it. And as for this London miss——"

"——But *is* she a London miss, Jem?" said Mary, again.

"——What she should trouble her head about our ball for, I cannot imagine," proceeded Mr Tufnell, without a pause. "Can't she get balls enough in London without running after them down here, asking for invitations, and taking up other girls' partners? I suppose you will have to ask her"—to Challoner—"as she is a lady you know; you will have to ask her once, but I should not put myself out of my way to do it twice. Let her take her chance; let her fare as the other girls do; why should we trouble ourselves about a stranger who has nothing to do with any of us? The Windlasses not even coming with her, and Jem here the only friend she has——"

Jem laughed; he could not help it.

"Eh?" said the banker, amazed.

"My acquaintance with Miss Appleby, sir, is so slight that it is not worth mentioning. I met her in the autumn at a house where I was pheasant-shooting. She is not likely to—to——"

"——To remember you?"

"To care to remember me. She has cut me dead twice in the street."



## CHAPTER XXIII.

HE WOULD BE SOMEWHERE ELSE ON THE NIGHT  
OF THE BALL.

"Drawne with the powre of an heart-robbing eye,  
And wrapt in fetters of a golden tresse."  
—SPENSER.

Six young ladies have been introduced to the reader in these pages, six ordinary, average, unremarkable, almost undistinguishable young ladies, all in the bloom of first youth, and none as yet giving promise of any lasting attraction when that bloom should have passed away. Yet, although all six might have been culled at random from the ranks of cheerful rosy faces one meets with every day, each had her own individual trait, which, if it could scarcely amount to a "redeeming vice," still served to mark her out to the student of character. Thus Lotta Hanwell was an important fool, whom the severest shock to her vanity would not have awakened to the fact that she was not of first-rate consequence in the eyes of the world. Mary Tufnell was a poor wit, who had long depended on the laugh of her friends. Emily, less endowed with animal life, clung to the romantic and sentimental. Bertha romped; while of the remaining two, Marion Appleby was a benevolent blunderer, who with the best intentions frequently did and said the wrong thing; and Juliet—but Juliet is the only one of the set who deserves more than this passing attention.

Juliet, to begin with, was not quite what she appeared to be. There was a little deep corner in her shallow mind, and in that depth there lurked a seed of power which none of her fellows possessed, and which but few suspected,—and it was the detection of this ability for mischief, this capacity for undertaking it and enjoyment

of it, which made the youngest Miss Appleby just worth notice in the eyes of the proud and penetrating Matilda.

She had been by times scornfully amused by Juliet's wiles; she was not afraid of either brother being beguiled by them.

And Juliet was useful at the Hall, and she came with her hair nicely brushed back behind her ears, and her simple frock tied in with a ribbon, and a string of coral round her neck; and she would hang so lovingly upon her dear Lady Matilda's arm, and sit at her feet, and lay her cheek upon her knee, and be so childish and fond and confiding, that the only wonder was she had not long before the period at which she first came under our notice been turned into the pet she desired to be. But Matilda wanted no pet, and hardly knew what to do with so much affection; she suffered her young friend,—up to a certain point she preferred her, which she ought not to have done, to the blunter and duller and truer Marion; but she did not trouble her head much about the Applebys, unless it were to summon them to perform a service or assist at a ceremony. That done, she would call the pair good girls, and commend them much as if they had been her waiting-maids, and presently she would toss them a favour in her imperial careless way; but as for making a companion of either miss, telling either one her thoughts, sharing with either her pursuits, Lady Matilda once owned with the special and startling candour with which she at times allowed home truths to Teddy, that she would as soon seek for a kindred spirit in her daughter: Lotta was at least on a par with the Applebys.

For mediocrity was just what this naughty Matilda could not tolerate; and having been endowed by heaven with beauty and talent enough to have satisfied a score of women if shared among them, she must needs jeer at those whom—who can tell?—she had perchance herself robbed.

It was shameful; and little Miss Appleby—Juliet, you understand—who was so fond of dear Lady Matilda to everybody round, and who could hardly keep away from dear Lady Matilda four days out of the five if the Hall were occupied,—Juliet, in spite of her admiration for everything said and done by her friend, was sometimes so spleenful and indignant that she could scarce contain herself, when time after time it proved that the youthful grandmother, still in her charms triumphant, drew to herself, and away from the pink-and-white daisies, the budding beauties of the neighbourhood—every man, old or young, who appeared on the scene. It was atrocious, it was more than feminine patience could stand, to see how one and another would, on pretexts the most trivial, steal into the magic circle which invariably formed around Matilda—to mark their efforts to obtain her notice, their joy beneath a word or smile of kindness; and never, perhaps, had this been more keenly felt by Juliet Appleby than on that November night when she and her sister had been summoned to meet Robert Hanwell's friends, Mr Whewell and Mr Challoner, who were hers and Marion's by right, and upon whom, could she have made an impression—even a decent impression—she might have made Teddy Lessingham blink his eyes and bestir himself to escape from his sister's dominion and lay hand and heart at her feet. But Whewell had only paid her a few stock compliments over the piano, and that apparently out of the mere superfluity of his good-humour with an evening so delightfully and exclusively given up to Matilda; while Challoner had as good as turned his back upon her, his partner, during dinner, and had never come near her afterwards;—and although he could not have been said to have then and there entered the lists with the gay barrister, no one knew better than Juliet Appleby how effectually he had made up for lost time afterwards.

She had bitten her lip from mortification more than once subsequently, when, ordered up to the Hall, she had found herself a mere lay figure at the entertainment, expected to talk and eat and behave properly and see nothing, while Challoner hung over Matilda's chair, and murmured in her ear, and gazed into her face.

She had been there one afternoon late, when Matilda had been playing to herself on the organ in the dim old gallery, and Matilda had been at no pains to bid her stay; but she had stayed in spite of this and almost in spite of herself,—stayed to see and spy. Challoner had come in presently. He had come in wet, tired, torn by thickets, and splashed with mud and mire, his shabby shooting clothes still on, hung round with shot and powder belts,—just as he was, in short, only having left his gun outside,—and he had taken off his cap, showing the disordered hair beneath in dark moist rings over his brow, and had sat down to listen, leaning his rough cheek on his hand, while a soft undisguised emotion stole over his face; and as he had sat there in the half light, his broad shoulders lounging forwards, a humble, subdued, over-mastered giant, he had looked a captive whom any woman might have been proud to win.

He had looked a captive, every inch a captive, too. None but a lover durst have sat where he sat, done as he did, come in as he had come. He had not spoken much, and Matilda had played softly on; but Juliet had left them thus, and she had left with a sting at her own heart. She, too, could have liked Jem Challoner,—and he had hardly seemed to know that she was there.

Her astonishment on hearing of his engagement to Mary Tufnell only a few hours before she saw him in the lecture-room at Clinkton—for of course she saw him, and saw that he saw her—may be imagined. Astonishment had at first been everything; then came deeper and deeper mortification, lastly malice. He had been an

engaged man, and yet he had dared to trifle with Lady Matilda Wilmot. Oh, how deeply must he have been in love to have so dared !

All else must have gone to the winds while he gave free play to his unlawful passion, and now doubtless he was here to break off the match and then return to Overton, to be received there with open arms. The horrid man—it was just like him. She hated the sight of his great big back as she sat behind it, pretty close behind it, during Herbert Mildmay's lecture ; she hated to remember how often she had seen it pass and repass along the terraces at Overton Hall. Then she had had a sight of the wretch's face, and seen that it was the same stony stick of a face that had been on view the first night at the Overtons' dinner-party—not the face that had subsequently grown under Matilda's hands—and all at once she had resolved not to see it this time. No, she would not seem to see him, would not speak to him until she had given her home-thrust,—but she would write to Lady Matilda that very night.

Prudence, however, intervened. Supposing that Lady Matilda already knew, no good would be gained ; supposing she did not, she would certainly not like Juliet Appleby the better for telling her. Besides, it would be delightful to lie in wait and see all she could of Challoner, and hear all that was to be heard of his doings, and then, *then* confront him before Mary Tufnell, and inquire, in a way that could not be mistaken, after his friend Lady Matilda Wilmot. The day after the lecture every one knew about the fancy ball, and it was at this fancy ball that Miss Appleby decided to make her great scene. The very next day to that on which it was to be given, she purposed returning south, and would then have the felicity of breaking the news to Matilda with all the surprise, and veiled sympathy, and delicate assumption of her auditor's indifference, that was appropriate and respectful. She

would be able to say that she had been presented to the future Mrs Challoner—that she had congratulated him, and that he had been forced to accept her congratulation; and she had seen herself saying this with a troubled and distressed face, and had also beheld a troubled distressed face averted from her as she spoke.

It was worth waiting for, this fancy ball.

Go to it she must—she liked fancy balls; and to go with a mysterious purpose, with a design on the peace of three several persons—to go with a knife under her glove and a leer under her mask—gave a zest to the promised evening, the like of which she had never had before. Short as the intervening time was, it seemed even longer to Juliet Appleby than it did to Jem Challoner.

All of these good people were thus, we see, playing their own game.

Challoner, whose hand was the worst, was becoming more and more reckless as time went on; and having got over his first fright on meeting Miss Appleby, and finding that she did not intend to recognise him under present circumstances, he made up his mind that all was yet unknown to her, and that she was merely revenging herself for previous neglect. She was now with the better sort of people, he with the worse; and it seemed to him that the ridiculous idea that he would have been glad now to claim an acquaintance he had previously despised, had incited her to turn up her nose and turn away her head from him.

It was charming; he was delighted with Juliet: Lord Overton's little note, which lay snug and safe in his breast-pocket, would assuredly never have been penned had she sent the tidings flying south. It was plain, it was as clear as day, that she had not heard a syllable, and the reason for such ignorance was seen in the charge laid by Mr Tufnell to her hosts the Windlasses; and—and such being the case, the devil returned to tempt

Challoner. The night of the ball was near, and Miss Juliet was to be there. So,—he would be elsewhere.

She should not see him attached to Mary Tufnell's red cross and black gown that merry evening.

Up to this hour he had been going drearily and dutifully on with what he had to do ; he had been walking in a plain path, and, though he had been unhappy, he had been able to keep his unhappiness to himself, and even to take some sort of comfort in the hope that he was at least giving no present cause of offence to an innocent girl or her relations. Even in his heart he had not given way to an unkind, or an unjust, or an unmanly thought; he had not allowed himself to fret, or to mock, or to swear ; but he had risen, morning by morning, wondering languidly what the day would bring forth—how soon the blow would fall, and his fate be sealed.

Any post might bring him the cool line from Overton which should ring his knell in its congratulations and good wishes ; and accordingly every postman's rap sent the blood faster through his pulses, especially when, as happened more than once, his eye caught a glimpse of a coroneted envelope among the budget brought in by the servant, and he knew as by instinct for whom it came, long before Tufnell's slow solemn voice read out, "James Challoner, Esq.," and handed the missive up the table. It would be from Teddy, of course. When Overton wrote, he contented himself with the nearest half-sheet handy ; even Matilda was not particular, unless she happened to be in a stately mood ; but Teddy never used any but the best paper and the biggest envelopes, and he was always glad to show off his excellent handwriting, and make the most of his correspondence. He said he wrote the best hand in the family, as indeed he did ; but Matilda appealed to Challoner, and of course he stood by her. He never saw his own name now in that bold free caligraphy without thinking of this. The scrap of paper

whereon the brother and sister had contested, their beautiful faces and mirthful voices as they did so, all came before him as often as he opened a fresh envelope, and he would for the next few seconds hear nothing of what was passing in the room—not, indeed, until he could draw one short breath of relief when assured that there was nothing, nothing yet.

The letter would be long, friendly, and full of information—he thought he knew who supplied the information, —and every topic and every reference meant this: “We have not forgotten you. Do not forget us.” How dear such an intimation was, how doubly dear as contrasted with what might have been, may be imagined.

Lord Overton’s invitation did the rest. Every honest resolution, every worthy aspiration gave way under it; coming as it did on the very day when the report about Miss Appleby’s being at the ball was confirmed, it was too much; Challoner went straight out and ordered the dress he did not mean to wear. One was ready, needing only a few slight alterations, and it could be sent in the same evening; and the gentleman professed himself satisfied,—and was so, after his own fashion.

Yes, he would give the ball the slip, plausibly. No one would guess that anything of the kind could have been his intention when the gorgeous suit had actually come in, and when his good hostess would have only seen afresh what a couple he and Willie Dobb had been. He would be off before any one was stirring in the morning, called away by business,—it seemed he was always being called away by business now; but on this occasion his departure would be easy—he would have nothing to say, and no one to see him go; he would merely leave a note of explanation, and then—then he would be somewhere else on that frosty night than in Mrs Dobb’s smart vestibule. His hand shook, and his eye glowed beneath his dark brows as he told himself where he would be, and



with whom. No news could now reach Overton before he did ; and once there, he might yet keep Matilda ignorant, might yet free himself, might yet—oh, he could not think of what he might not yet do, once he had broken loose, had awakened from the nightmare of the past fortnight.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### TIME PASSES.

"The wheel of life no less will stay  
In a smooth than rugged way."

—COWLEY.

So much for the man; now for the woman.

Very quietly, not unhappily, Matilda's days passed. Memory, on the one hand, supplied pleasant themes, which Hope, on the other, whispered would soon return; she doubted nothing, and feared nothing. Challoner's abrupt departure had, truth to tell, charmed her more with him than anything else could have done; and the conviction that it only remained with herself to summon him back at any moment, rendered her able to support her dignity and pass the time of his absence without much inward, and without any apparent, weariness.

Her schools, her poor people, her brothers, even her daughter, had plenty of her company, and benefited by her cheerfulness. There was a poor woman who was sick, several miles away from Overton; Matilda visited her every day, read to her, sang to her, brightened and cheered her dingy little room,—almost made her forget her pain. The boys in her Sunday class were troublesome; she made no complaint of them, she won them over by patience and forbearance. The good rector of

the parish was more devoted to her ladyship than ever. He had always said the earl was a model of a gentleman, and his sister an excellent, charitable, practical Christian,—not what you could call profoundly pious, not perhaps a very deeply thinking woman, but one who was always to be found on the right side, whose heart was in the right place, and who, he believed, would grow in grace as she advanced in life. If we are to be known by our fruits, the worthy speaker would proceed, he wished all his parishioners had as good fruits to show as Lady Matilda Wilmot. Her conduct to her brother now—he did not refer to Overton—the way she managed that young Lessingham, was beyond praise. A wild young fellow, and scarcely more than half-witted, he was going to the bad as fast as he could go when his sister took him in hand. Lucky for him it was her being a widow,—and scarcely any other kind of a widow would have done. Why, she was as good as a young fellow for Teddy; she rode with him, walked with him, played billiards with him, amused him, and kept him out of mischief from morning to night. She brought him to church, too, regularly,—brought him twice in the day; whereas, until she came he had never, or hardly ever, been inside a place of worship since he was a boy.

People talked of Lady Matilda's marrying again. That was all nonsense. Poor thing! she had had enough of marriage,—given over, when she was a mere child, to a selfish old cur, who had made her life miserable. She would think twice before she burnt her fingers a second time. There was that Mr Challoner. To be sure Mr Challoner had been hanging about for a considerable time; and he must own that just for a short space—for a very short space—he had had his suspicions. Certainly Mr Challoner had seemed very intimate, and he was a fine-looking man, not too young; but oh, there was nothing in it—nothing in it. Lady Matilda was a lively woman,

who made herself pleasant without meaning it, (he would not have said she flirted for the world); and here was a proof that it was as he said, in Mr Challoner's having taken himself off, and all going on as before at the Hall. Lady Matilda had been down at the rectory the day before, and everybody there had remarked that she was quite in her usual bright spirits, full of the Christmas charities and Christmas decorations, and not even inclined to grumble at the frost, which compelled her to forego her favourite exercise and go about on foot.

Very little inclined to grumble, indeed, had Matilda been; that frost had another meaning for her than going about on foot; it meant Overton's despatch, and it was all that was wanted in the way of an excuse for the same. After being at the rectory, hearing and entering into all the arrangements there, and paying a long and friendly visit, the fair pedestrian found herself still with half the afternoon on her hands, Teddy being busy at the skating-ponds, which were to be cleared, swept, and tidied, in view of the approaching Christmas Eve. That Christmas Eve, it must be remarked, was the evening of the Clinkton festivity; and it was also to be signalised at Overton Hall: Challoner had telegraphed that he could not come the same day, but would be with them on that following,—it had been at once and unanimously decided that the home ponds should not be skated upon until he came.

"I had better go on to Endhill," concluded Lady Matilda, as she emerged from the rectory; "I may as well see Lotta to-day, as perhaps she may have to complain of me by-and-by," with a little smile. "It is really a good thing Lotta is so near," her thoughts ran on; "it is pleasant to be able to see her and the dear baby whenever I like; and if she lived further off, I fear I should go but seldom. Teddy dislikes it so much: that is another reason for going to-day. I don't like taking poor Teddy where he does not wish to go. And he—(not

Teddy this time)—he dislikes it, too. Well, well, they are men, and must be humoured, I suppose; we women always do have to take the disagreeables in this life on to our own shoulders. Now, of course, I like going to see Lotta, but then I hate just as much as they do going to see Robert——,” and here she caught sight of Robert, and had no more time for reflections—the reflections, you will understand, having twirled and twisted, and run in and out of her brain as she walked, so that she was still harping on the one idea, with all its multifarious variations, when she turned in at the cottage-drive.

Robert was in the garden, busy with some projected alterations, and his companion, whom he was consulting and advising, and explaining to, was Lotta. Lotta loved to consult.

“If you ask me, Robert, I should not go quite so far along the wall. That is the only thing. All the rest would be perfect. You are such a good planner——”

“You see I have thought it out thoroughly, my dear. You may be right about its being too far; but I doubt it. However, I will consider your opinion.”

“Oh, my opinion,” she thought it only second to his—“my opinion is really worth very little, I am afraid, Robert. *You* know; of course, *I*—I only say what I think; this is not my department——”

“To be sure not; but I am always glad to hear what you have to say. When one gives one’s whole attention to a thing, however, as I have done to this—— Ah, Lady Matilda,” as she walked up, “who would have thought of seeing you to-day? You have not ridden, of course. Uncle Edward with you? Pray come in and rest. Lotta, my dear——”

“——And without your hat, Lotta; do you want to catch a cold?” said Lady Matilda, kissing her daughter. “It is not summer, though the sun is shining, and——”

“You are often without yours, mamma.”

"I am different. I am not a catch-coldy person, and I have a thicker mop of hair," said Lady Matilda, frankly. "Besides which, I don't know that you ever saw me sitting out of doors in a sharp frost with a bare head."

"I had only sat down for a moment."

"But your mother is certainly right, my dear," said Robert; "I ought to have thought of that, if you did not. I will get your hat at once," and he was starting off.

"No; stop; let me go myself," said Lotta, rising somewhat heavily, for Lotta had not grown thinner since we saw her last. "You are busy, Robert, and I have nothing to do. Let me go."

"Not at all. Stay where you are. I am never busy if you need me," rejoined he, heartily. "I am only sorry that I did not notice before that you required a hat. Lady Matilda, the wheelbarrow will dirty your dress; allow me." He drew it aside, and passed on to the house. As he did so, he did not seem nearly so ridiculous as usual: Matilda felt no inclination to scoff, and looked after the retreating figure with a sensation that was almost new.

He was a poor specimen of a man, this Robert, but was he not a good husband? What would it be like to have even such a husband—one who would spontaneously avow after more than a year's matrimony that he was never busy if his wife required an attention? And she actually found herself taking note for the future, and with a sense of something like shame for the past, that there might be worse things in the world than an over-drawn politeness, when it was thus carried into the recesses of home-life.

There he was, that long-backed prig, stalking solemnly towards them, stalking along cheerfully and readily with the precious covering for his precious Lotta's head; and there was she affectionately, if somewhat stolidly, re-

ceiving the attention, the two quite taken up with each other for the time being. With a softer feeling at her heart than she could have at all explained, Lady Matilda watched the little scene, marked the little pat on Lotta's shoulder which acknowledged Lotta's thanks, and Lotta's satisfied tranquil reception of the same, as of one used to such kindly treatment,—and then the visitor rather suddenly said she would go indoors.

She would not hear of taking any one else in with her. Lotta had let out that Robert was busy, and her mother could wait till he and Lotta were at liberty. Lotta must stay with him, of course; she was “a help,” quite gravely,—

“Well, I suppose I am,” said Lotta. “At least Robert thinks so. He says he would rather go by what I say than an architect. Of course that is going too far, but I always feel I understand a *little* of these things.”

“Which I do not. And so, as I can be of no use——”

“——My dear Lady Matilda! Of no use!——”

“——Of no sort of use. I will just go in by myself, and you shall come when you are ready. Yes, I will rest, thank you. I have lots of time to stay. Don't hurry. I will go and fetch down baby and have a play with him;” and with a quick step she tripped off merrily towards the house.

Half an hour afterwards, which was the extreme limit Mr Hanwell's decorum would permit of their remaining behind, he and Lotta found her in the drawing-room, sitting on a low seat by the fire, gazing into the embers, with the babe asleep upon her knee.

They stood in front of the window as they passed, and looked in, and spoke, but no one answered, and they could not attract attention by signs.

“Mamma is so absent, she never notices anything when she is in these moods,” said Lotta. Then, entering, “Ho,

mamma! what are you thinking about, in here? You were quite lost in a day-dream, I should say, just now. Robert and I stood and peeped in at you through the window,—we thought you would have heard us; but we did not tap, for fear of disturbing baby. We thought you would have seen us, but you never looked round.”

“The window was shut,” said Lady Matilda, curtly.

“We must have darkened the window.”

“Perhaps you did.”

“And we had a good look at you. Robert said you made quite a pretty picture in the firelight, you and baby. Is he not a dear boy? Look at his little fat arm. How nicely it shows against your dark velvet! Robert said you ought to be painted holding him just like this,” attaching full value to the compliment, with a distinct impression that Robert’s comments, whether expressed or otherwise, were not always so favourable. “Do you know, mamma, I really do believe,” continued the young matron slowly—“I really do believe that we shall have to shortcoat him before the three months are out; I really do.”

“Shortcoat Robert?”

“Mamma! of course I meant baby; did I not say baby? but you were not attending.”

“Perhaps not, my dear; no, I don’t know that I was,” said Lady Matilda, calmly.

“But do attend now, for it is really a serious matter. If any one else had suggested it—but Mrs Burrble herself said I must.”

“Well, my dear, do it.”

“Before the three months are out! And in the depth of winter, in weather like this! Mamma!”

“Well, my dear, don’t do it.”

“Mamma, you are really—— All I mean is that he grows so tremendously fast, that I don’t see how we *can*

keep him in his long clothes any longer: he is bursting out of them everywhere; and what to do, I declare I don't know. It is nonsense making new bodies, when he really could wear short things perfectly well; and yet I do not like—indeed I could not, and would not on any account, run the risk of shortcoating in this weather. What do you think?"

"It is difficult to say," observed Lady Matilda, thoughtfully.

But her thoughtfulness was, alas! detected. "I declare, mamma, I don't believe you are thinking a bit about it," cried Lotta, unfortunately on the alert. "I believe you never heard a word I said, and I was going to tell you how nice he looks in your new pelisse," mollified by the recollection; "it is really a beautiful pelisse; and oh, mamma, where can I get that kind of edging on the frock? Nurse says it is much the finest and best she has seen, and it will wash beautifully."

"I am very glad of it."

"Do you know where it could be got? And the flannel—I should like to show you our flannel; I do not feel sure that it is fine enough——"

"——Pray don't, my dear. I—I never did know about flannel and things. And then it is so long ago, and somehow I seem to have—to have lost sight of it all. I love a baby," pressing the infant tenderly to her bosom; "I love this dear little baby very much—but I am afraid I do not care as I ought to do about its clothes," with a smile.

"Oh, but it must be dressed," said Lotta, sententially. "You would not have it without anything to put on—

—Oh yes, I would," laughed her mother.

"Well, you are odd, mamma. But you hold him very nicely," said Lotta, patronisingly. "Do you remember the day Mr Challoner was here—the day before



he left—when you would put baby into his arms? How frightened he was! I declare I believe he had never had a baby in his arms before.”

“I declare I believe you may be right, my dear.” Lady Matilda was bending over the little one, and trying for her own gay tone.

“He was so very awkward.”

“So very awkward.”

“Mr Whewell took him as handily as possible. But,” continued Lotta, astutely, “although Mr Whewell made such a fuss over baby, and gave him a very handsome mug, and said all kinds of civil things, I like Mr Challoner really the best of the two. Mr Whewell grew to be tiresome. It was very good of him to come down, I know, and of course Robert and I were pleased—but he stayed too long, quite too long; and the worst of it is, Robert says he is sure he wants to be asked down again. I should not ask him, though, should you?”

“Certainly not,” said Lady Matilda, promptly.

“Robert says he believes he will offer. I think we might almost refuse him if he did offer.”

“I should.”

“Well, I must say I like baby’s other godfather the best,” concluded Lotta, comfortably.

“Ah, but,” said Matilda to herself, as she walked home afterwards,—“but would you say the same, my dear, if baby’s other godfather were to be turned into baby’s grandfather?”

And the appellation struck her as so delightfully ludicrous, that she laughed aloud all by herself on the lonely road.

## CHAPTER XXV.

## THE FANCY BALL.

"A freak took an ass in the head, and away he goes into the woods, masquerading up and down in a lion's skin."—L'ESTRANGE'S *Fables*.

"*Him* he knew well, and guessed that it was *she*,  
But being masked, he was not sure ;—"

—SHAKESPEARE.

Good Mrs Dobb, standing in the doorway of her handsome drawing-room as the clock struck nine on Christmas Eve—they kept early hours in Clinkton—standing in the crimsonest of crimson satins, covered with the laciest of Brussels lace, with all her best ornaments finding niches somehow or other on the surface of her ample person, with her gloves on and her fan in hand,—was certainly not the least happy person at the prospect of her own ball.

Punctually at nine arrived the last detachment of the Tufnells, claiming the right which had been so carefully explained to Challoner; and though with them, and with their sympathy, admiration, and expectation, began the evening's triumph, with them also came the first disappointment. They had not brought their man, their great Mr Challoner, who was to have taken such a prominent part in the evening's show,—for he was to have sat at Mrs Dobb's own table at supper, and to have gone in with the first batch of distinguished guests as soon as the dining-room door was open. Alack-a-day! he was nowhere to be seen, and the sad truth about him was soon told.

"He had to go, Mrs Dobb; he really *had* to go," said Mary. "He had to be off before we were out of bed in the morning, and goodness knows where he is by this time!"

"And was it not hard upon the poor dear," added her mother, "that it should have happened to-day of all days in the year? Business is a nasty thing—and so I always tell papa. If it had been to-morrow now,—but that is just like poor Jem's luck; like enough it would have been to-morrow for any one who didn't care. And then Jem Challoner is so conscientious—really one may say too conscientious; for, as I say to papa, one may be too conscientious about a thing of this sort. But papa, he could not see it; he took me up quite short, and says he, 'Business is business. Jem Challoner is not such a ninny as to let any tomfoolery—ahem—hem—any pleasure like this interfere with duty.' Papa is such a one for duty, you know; and he thinks all the world of Jem Challoner."

"Well, to be sure this is all very nice," added papa, for himself,—“very nice, indeed,” benignantly; “and Mrs Dobb is very kind to take so much trouble; but a man of forty like Challoner——”

“——Do hear papa,” muttered Mary Tufnell aside to her sister. “Calling out for every one to hear. Man of forty, indeed! Now it will be all over the town to-morrow. Cecy looked at me and laughed — she is laughing now!”

“What does it matter?” argued Bertha, cheerfully; “Cecy would take a man of fifty, and be thankful. Besides we all know Jem's age. Hasn't he lived here all his life?”

“They will think he was too old for dancing, and ran away from the ball.”

“They will think nothing of the sort. However—— Mrs Dobb,” said Bertha loudly, “is it not hard lines upon poor Mary? And Jem had got such a lovely dress, a dress he could dance in——”

“Say costume,” nudged her sister. “Don't you remember how he laughed at you for calling it his ‘dress’?”

"All right—his costume, then. It had been sent in, Mrs Dobb, and was—sweet."

"Indeed! Now really, poor fellow! well, I am sorry, but we must all have something, Mary, my dear," continued the jolly hostess, recovering from her own share of vexation. "And don't you fret, but just be as merry as ever you can; be merry for two, you know, and that will be the best way of making up for Mr Jem's absence." Other arrivals then claimed her notice.

There is one excellent thing about a fancy ball,—conversation never flags; there is no need to have recourse to the weather, the heat of the rooms, the badness or goodness of the music: even the dullest need hardly be at a loss for a topic when on every side are motley figures and extraordinary devices; and how charming Mistress Mountebank looks in her powder! how quaint Master Scarecrow in his skins! what the judge has done with his wig; and how much the peasant has given for her shoe-buckles, will pass from lip to lip without an effort throughout the evening. Ere the rooms were half filled at Mrs Dobb's, the din and uproar was all that the heart of hostess could desire.

"And which is Miss Juliet Appleby, dear?" inquired Mrs Tufnell when a moment's peace was accorded from the incessant shaking of hands and receiving of congratulations. "Mrs Dobb, dear, where is Miss Juliet Appleby? I thought she was to have come with the Greens?"

"So she was. Ay, with the Greens, certainly."

"But the Greens came a quarter of an hour ago."

"And was Miss Appleby not with them?"

"Was she, though?"

"I can't say, I'm sure; I suppose she was. To tell the truth, Mrs Tufnell, I have not known who was who, or which was which, no, nor heard a word of what has been said to me this hour back. I just go on shaking

hands with everybody. For, letting alone that it has been nothing but—"May I bring this one?" and "Have you room for that one?" for days past, I should not know my own children if they appeared bedecked and bedizened as those folks were who came upstairs just now. That I should not—Willie, nor none of them. I am bamboozled altogether by this time," laughing. "There may be a dozen Miss Applebys here, and I should not know one of 'em."

Mr Tufnell, on his part, was as curious as his wife. "Well, neighbour George," said he, facetiously alluding to the royal and gorgeous George IV. suit affected by his host the worthy Dobb,—“well, you have a wondrous sight of folks here to-night—Jews, Turks, infidels, and heretics, eh? Strikes me your girls and mine look as well as anybody. I have been poking about in all the corners while you were at your post outside, and, upon my word, I see no one who looks trigger than my Mary, in spite of Challoner's putting a stopper on the gewgaws. Look at that creature now,—that, I presume, is Miss Juliet Appleby, the Windlasses' fine lady——”

"That? No; that is Polly Beanfield, my wife's niece, as good a girl as ever lived, and looks first-rate, *I* think," rejoined Mr Dobb, somewhat shortly. "If girls are to trick out, what fault have you to find with her, eh? Shows her ankles, eh? No harm—no harm. Very good ankle, and knows it, the minx. You watch her dancing."

"To be sure,—to be sure," rejoined his friend, somewhat taken aback. "I—ah—I ought to have known it was Polly; of course I know Polly; I must speak to Polly by-and-by——"

"——*There's* a figure now. I don't like *that*, if you choose," proceeded his companion, softly. "There's a tippety concern. No better than a ballet-dancer—and nothing to excuse it. Who is she, I wonder? Cecy," beckoning to his daughter, as she went by—"Cecy, who is that? What are you laughing at, girl?"

"At poor Mr Grumby in the corner; oh, papa, do look at him. He did not want to come, he hates the whole thing, and fought against it to the last; but Mrs Grumby would not let him off, and as she could not make him get anything for himself, she borrowed a suit for him; and look at it," in an ecstasy—"look at it. That petticoat of a tunic, inches below his knees, and the sleeves all over his hands, and the great crease across the back,—it must belong to a man three times his size. I must find out who the man is. And oh, papa, did you ever see any one so miserable and so conscious? See how he crouches and cowers in his corner! nothing will induce him to leave that corner; he thinks the flower-pots hide him. It is too much—oh, it is really too much! We girls have been in perfect fits——"

"——Poor chap! he ought to put a bolder face upon it," rejoined her father, complacently. "There's no sense in showing everybody he's ashamed of himself. One should never do things by halves, eh, Tufnell? If one must be a fool,—for my part I feel as jolly as you please."

"What I say is, we are no worse than the London grandees going to a *levée*," said Tufnell. "I have seen them, and 'pon my word, they looked very like you and me, Dobb, barring the wigs. Those they left to their coachmen."

"Does not papa look well, Mr Tufnell?" inquired papa's dutiful Cecy.

"Oh, oh, very fine, miss: you think so, do you? You first coax me into these fine feathers, and then stroke them down. That's the way with 'em all, isn't it, Tufnell?" and the two elderly gentlemen laughed in unison. "But I say, Cis, I say, who is that *ballet*-looking girl yonder?" continued her father, as the figure which had attracted his attention before again came into view. "Eh? Who do you say? I can't hear."

"Hush, papa! take care. I have not a notion. Some one somebody brought with them——"

"——Miss Juliet Appleby, for a wager!" cried Tufnell.

"No, not her." Cecy shook her head. "Stay, I remember; she came with Mrs Poyntz—a Yorkshire girl. Mrs Poyntz wrote about her this morning."

"Then where in the name of wonder is this Miss Juliet?" demanded Mr Tufnell, almost with vexation. "Is that her?" indicating a 'Folly' in bells; "or that?" pointing to a 'May Queen;' "or that?" turning again to a 'Red Riding-Hood.'

"'Folly' is Miss Smith; and the 'May Queen' is Chatty, our cousin Chatty; and I don't know 'Red Riding-Hood's' name, but she came with the Greens——"

"But she can't be Miss Juliet Appleby?"

"Why not?"

"Miss Appleby! the fine Miss Appleby! the Windlasses' smart young lady,—a little round-faced plump chit!" cried Tufnell, absurdly disappointed; for, to tell the truth, 'Red Riding-Hood' would have disarmed a heart of stone, and he had no mind to be disarmed. "I think you must be wrong, my dear Miss Cecy; I don't think it can be as you say."

"Well, I did not say anything, Mr Tufnell,—that is," said Cecy, good-temperedly, "I told you that girl," nodding, "came with the Greens; but whether she is Miss Appleby or not, I know no more than you do yourself."

"She can't be; she can never be," muttered the banker.

"Ask Mrs Green. Here she comes. Mrs Green," said Miss Dobb, running to her, "Mrs Green, do tell us who is your sweet little 'Red Riding-Hood'? Here is Mr Tufnell dying to know," archly. "She came with you, and I am so stupid, I forget her name."

"Little Nelly Burnaby, do you mean?" replied Mrs

Green. "Oh yes, your good mamma kindly allowed me to bring Nelly, as we were disappointed at the last moment of the other young lady. I thought it a pity no one should have the treat, and poor Nelly was so pleased. She had a dress with her, as it happened, on the chance. Poor thing, it was a catch for her; 'it's an ill wind that blows nobody good.' I wrote about it to your mamma this morning——"

"So you did, now I remember; but I said she came with you, though I forgot the rest. Well, Mr Tufnell,—well, are you satisfied?"

"Oh dear me! you make me out very inquisitive," said he. "You see, Mrs Green, when your dancing days are over, you have nothing to do but gape and stare; and as I know mostly all here, when I see a stranger I naturally want to hear who she is. You were saying your other young lady had disappointed you. The other young lady—ahem—was she,—I think I heard she was to be a Miss Appleby, or some such name; not that I know anything of any Miss Applebys: we have no Applebys about Clinkton, but——"

"But she doesn't come from Clinkton, Mr Tufnell—she's not a Clinkton person at all; only it happens that she is stopping in the neighbourhood, and it just came into my head one day when we were talking of the ball, it popped into my head to ask Mrs Dobb if I might take the liberty of bringing her——"

"But you *haven't* brought her"—there was an actual indignation in his tone,——"you haven't brought her after all, it appears. She has shirked, eh? Thrown you over at the last moment, I suppose? Just like them, these fast fashionable young ladies; what do they care for our poor little attempts at gaiety? Not likely any one of them would put themselves about to——"

"—— She is put about enough, poor thing, I can tell you," cried Mrs Green, who in vain had essayed from



time to time to be heard. "Laws, Mr Tufnell, that rosette should have been better sewn on," stooping, as she spoke, to pick up a knot of gay-coloured ribbons which had fallen to the floor displaced by his vehemence. "See now, a mere stitch it is," proceeded the good lady, inspecting, "and a thread no stronger than a hair. Well, it's lucky I have a pin," producing one. "I told the girls pins would be needed; and though you are the first, Mr Tufnell, I'll answer for it you'll not be the last."

"Thankee, thankee," said Mr Tufnell, somewhat disconcerted; "that comes of bedizening one's self out in such rubbish—but it is safe enough now, I daresay. And—and what kept your young lady away, then, if I may make bold to ask? What is the reason of her not being with you after all?"

"Oh dear, such a sad pity it is, Mr Tufnell! And what poor Mr and Mrs Windlass will do I'm sure I cannot think, for they are getting to be old bodies now, and don't like to be put out of their way. And the poor thing herself, too, away from all her friends—well, I declare, there's Mary Philipson with a pair of men's boots on! Spurs and all! Mr Tufnell—look, Mr Tufnell," behind her fan, "did you ever see the like of that? Boots and spurs, coat and collar, and the little hat just over her ear! Well, it's a wonder she stopped short there; she might just as well have had the—ahem—bless me! I'm sure I hardly know which way to look."

"Oh, it's all right, ma'am, it's quite within the limits, I believe," rejoined Mr Tufnell, who had learned much within the last half hour; "it took me rather aback, I own, at the first blush, but—well, well, we must not be too particular to-night. And to return to Miss Juliet Appleby——"

"And not a bit ashamed of herself!" murmured the lady, still dubiously scanning the gay *vivandière*, "skipping and twirling as bold as brass,"

"Eh? What?" cried her companion, pricking up his ears. "As bold as brass, did you say? Who's as bold as brass?"

"That flibbertigibbet, Mary——"

"Oh," rejoined Mr Tufnell, disappointed,—“oh, I thought you were speaking of Miss Appleby.” The less he could hear about Miss Appleby, the more was his curiosity and suspicion aroused. “I thought you had meant that she was ‘as bold as brass,’” he continued; “for really, you know, after all, you have not yet told me what is the matter with her.”

“And I can’t tell you; but I can tell you what *they* say: they say it’s chicken-pox. Mrs Windlass writes this morning that she is all over in a rash, and sick, and pretty nearly off her head—at least, I may be mistaken, but that is what I gather from the note. And I know that the doctor—Dr Bell it is who attends the Windlasses; they think all the world of Dr Bell,—I know he was to have been here to-night, was he not, Cecy?” catching hold of Miss Cecily Dobb, who again came near, placing herself at the moment to take the lead in a sixteen set of lancers which was being formed in front of the corner wherein the elderly pair were having their chat, and who now turned amiably round.

“What is it, Mrs Green?”

“Was not Dr Bell to be here to-night, Cecy?”

“Yes, and Mrs Bell; mamma asked them both,” said Cecy.

“Ay, and Mrs Bell is here, for I saw her just now, all over spangles and gold lace. But you see the doctor is not come; he is at Windlass Court at this minute, or I’m mistaken. So, between ourselves, Mr Tufnell—between ourselves, I doubt if chicken-pox will cover it. We all know what’s meant when there’s any doubt about it’s being chicken-pox, don’t we?”

“Eh? What?” said the banker, staring.

"You know what's being going about?" in a whisper.

"Ah?" said he, interrogatively.

"That's it, then; that's what I mean. If it isn't *small-pox*, it's nothing."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE MOTH RETURNS TO ITS CANDLE.

"But come what may, I do adore thee so,  
That danger shall seem sport, and I will go."

—*Twelfth Night*.

As the evening wore on, Mary Tufnell began to enjoy her ball. She was a girl, it must be owned, who would have enjoyed anything, and been merry anywhere, provided that she had people to laugh with, and chaff with, and flirt—in moderation—with. To wear a new dress, and hear a ball-tune going, was more than enough to raise her spirits under the severest toothache or heartache she had ever known. And so, since there was no help for it, and she had been perforce deserted at a moment when such desertion was most inopportune, she soon began to feel that enough sighs had been expended, and that although the evening was shorn of its chief glory, there yet remained abundance of attraction.

It was something now to remember that Jem had never been enthusiastic on the subject; at the best, every one must have seen that for himself he did not care twopence about the great event of the day, but was going because *they* were going,—trying to like what Mary liked, and not to be bored by what gave her pleasure; and such being the case, and with the comfortable certainty that any annoyance the good kind fellow might now be feeling would be solely on her account, the philosophic maid soon

picked up her spirits, and had scarce answered the last inquiry for an absent Jem, before she was promising this waltz, and that galop, and all the "extras" to a present one.

"But Mary's flirtations are always so very open and above-board," said Cecily Dobb, who had eyes for all that went on. "Mary never does really flirt, you know, at all,—she would not know how, if she tried; and that, I suppose, is the reason she has gone and engaged herself to that dreadful man Challoner. He would frighten any ordinary girl out of her senses, but Mary does not care how he looks at her. Do hear her rattling on now! *That's* not flirting. None of those Tufnell girls have the dreamiest idea of what flirting is," continued Miss Dobb, with conscious superiority.

The next minute it was, "Oh fie! you naughty creature, you! Now Mary, I'll tell. You throw over Captain James this very moment, and promise to have no more to do with him. What! you won't? Very well; very well. Papa is looking on, my dear. You know what he will say to you. Take care; beware, lady fair," laughing herself away.

But this was only Cecy Dobb's idea of being agreeable to her guests. "Mary likes to have it thought she is dangerous and mischievous," she said to herself; and as for the whole charge, it rested on absolutely no foundation; while even if it had, papa, who certainly might have objected to the sight of the obnoxious uniform in conjunction with the nurse's black robe, was far too much engrossed otherwise to have perceived it.

This was his hour of relaxation and benignity; and surrounded as he was by mirth and jollity, by a motley crowd of people, who were not indeed for the most part strangers, but worse—old friends with new faces, asses in lions' skins, pussies in boots—it was too much to expect that he should have time or attention for anything but

discoveries. Having satisfied his curiosity on the score of Miss Juliet Appleby, he now willingly subsided into the pleased and amused spectator.

Mrs Tufnell also had her hands full. She was perpetually being addressed by familiar voices proceeding from unfamiliar lips; she heard the delighted laugh at her expense; she had to own to her bewilderment, then to excuse it, then to join in merriment over it, then to retail it; she had to eat ices and drink champagne, to take care that she spilt nothing over her fine dress, to steal a sly peep at her head in the glass when a chance offered—to take a turn now and again round the rooms, to admire the hangings and wonder at the space, and consider if she could do anything of the kind herself, supposing papa could be brought over to it; and lastly, she had to make herself agreeable to the portly uncle of her hostess, who had come from Manchester on purpose to grace, by his august presence, the festivity, and who was elected to the honour of escorting Mrs Dobb's chief friend to the supper-table.

Thus for the worthy dame. Of the rest of our party, all that remains to be said is that Emily quite satisfied Herbert in her "Dolly Varden," and Bertha admired herself in a richer costume. No one was able to find any fault either with their entertainers or entertainment; and, indeed, when all was said and done, and danced and eaten, the only shame was, according to the banker's soft-hearted wife, that nobody had thought more about that poor dear who had been done out of it all.

How the poor dear bore his disappointment, and what he was about during the gay hours when the Clinkton fiddlers were fiddling and the Clinkton exquisites were footing it on the floor, may now be told.

The light was just beginning to wane when the train from London, which Challoner had been able by good luck and punctuality to catch, drew up at the station for

Overton Hall; but even before it stopped, his eye caught the glitter of silver-tipped harness on the back of a restive horse, and of the light-blue livery of Lord Overton's groom bending forward from the dogcart, soothing and managing.

No one else had come to meet him, but the man was charged with excuses. Mr Edward was so extremely busy he could not find the time,—this was the correct message,—but something else was added with a twinkle of the eye, which showed how well William understood the ways of his betters. “It was her ladyship who dissuaded Mr Edward, sir, the roads being so bad with the frost, and the mare only roughed this morning. She has not been out these three days, sir, that’s what makes her cheerful like. Wo-ho, Jenny, then! Mr Edward do go it when he comes this station-road, sir; he likes to come in with a dash; and in weather like this, there’s no saying——” and he shook his head.

“All well?” said Mr Challoner, presently.

“All quite well, sir. There’s skating on the ponds to-night, sir.”

“I suppose so. The night looks well, too. The frost holds firm, I see.”

“Never saw it holding faster, sir. His lordship is a rare good skater, Mr Challoner,” continued the man, who was quite at home with Mr Challoner and full of his subject. “His lordship is better than Mr Edward, although Mr Edward flies about all over the place. Both our gentlemen were out last night, sir.”

“Was—ah—any one else out?”

“No, sir; I think not, sir. There is no one else at the Hall just now, sir. I think I heard her ladyship was going to-night, though; Charles thought he heard so, at least. Her ladyship does go out occasionally, but she has not been this frost.”

“Not at all?”

"Not by night, sir."

"She is waiting for me," said Challoner to himself; "she promised that she would, and she has kept her word. Well, I have kept mine: here I am. She has but to send for me, and I am at her service. She has never yet found me remiss,—I wonder if she ever will."

It seemed as though he had been years away, as one object after another, each bringing up some remembrance, trifling enough in itself, but inexpressibly dear to his impassioned and excited memory, now rose to view. Here they were at the cross-roads. There was the broad row of beeches to the left; there the little wayside inn. What a brawling the half-frozen brook made below the bridge!—that brook, whose treacherous banks had once given way when he and Teddy and Matilda were hunting ferns that grew among the nooks and cliffs. He had held his fair companion up, and she had had to cling to him, even while making light of a possible catastrophe. But she had worn a tuft of the ferns, which had like to have cost so dear, as a shoulder-knot that evening.

Then here was the stile whereon his lady had so often rested while her escort gave the dogs their dip, and from which she had once fallen—yes, absolutely fallen—until her other brother most luckily caught her in his arms, so startled was she by his surprising her once when thus left alone. It was only Overton—the quiet peaceable Overton—who had thus broken in upon his sister's reverie; but so lost had she been in musings that she had shrieked aloud, and Overton's laugh had rung through the woods. What had she been thinking of?

He was nearly as fully occupied by inward reflections himself, when they came to the last turning of the avenue, and had the first sight of the Hall.

That, however, brought him back to the present. In another few minutes he would be there; he would be running up the front steps, he meeting Teddy—always

first—be seeing Overton in the background, and another figure behind him—— No; they were *here*! “Halloo! halloo!” he was hailed as he passed.

“Stop, and let me out,” said Mr Challoner, very quietly. “Take on my things, will you? I see—Mr Edward—in the garden.”

“Here you are! here you are!” cried Teddy’s joyous voice from the shrubs. “How are you?” vaulting over the low gate between them. “How *are* you? Awfully glad you could come. But I said I knew you would come if you could. I was too busy to come to the station. I have only just met Matilda here. We were looking out for you.”

“How do you do?” Lady Matilda had at last succeeded in opening the gate for herself, and came forward to do her part. “How do you do?” she said in rather a low voice, and left all further inquiries and welcome to her brother.

“Deadly cold journey you must have had,” said he. “I would not have set foot in a train to-day for any money. Beastly things at the best of times; and on a day like this, when every time the door opens it lets in a gale of wind that cuts like a knife—woo—ogh!” with a shudder.

“We had better come in and have some tea,” said Matilda.

“Why, it’s not time for it yet,” exclaimed Teddy. “What do you want tea so soon for? Oh, for Challoner, of course. I beg your pardon, Challoner; what an ass I am! But I forgot, and it is so early. Come in, of course. Matilda and I were just taking a turn round the garden, but we’ll come in now.”

“Don’t come in for me.”

“Oh, you won’t care to stop out.”

“But I do. I should prefer it.”

“You must be cold, or something.”



"I am perfectly warm—hot; I don't want to go in at all."

"Not for tea?"

"Not for any amount of tea. If Lady Matilda"—he was walking along by her side,—“if Lady Matilda—unless she—provided she does not—does not mind.”

Lady Matilda did not mind at all—had no wishes—and quite preferred—anything. In short, was to the full as coherent and sensible as he.

Should they go up the laurustinus walk? The laurustinus was in blossom, and not affected even by such a frost. It was several years since there had been such a frost.

Then Teddy broke in afresh. “Won't we have a night of it? The ice is as smooth as a mill-pond, and we have had every leaf and twig picked off by the boys. We made the little beggars work; they broomed away like anything at the last. And we have got such a fireplace, Challoner,—you should see our fireplace; it's all bricked in; and Matilda is sending down kettles, and pots, and pans, and all kinds of things.”

“You are going yourself?” inquired Challoner, looking straight in front of him, but there was no doubt as to whom the “you” was meant for.

“I—I think so.”

“Going? Of course she's going: what is to hinder her?” cried Teddy. “We have been polishing up her skates, and oiling her straps; and, I say, I have got such a pair of beauties. I wish,”—stopping short—“I say, I wish you would come in and see them.”

“Thanks; presently. Are they like mine, I wonder? I must get mine out and give a look to them before dinner. I have not had them on yet, but——”

“——Not had them on yet! Why, we have had two good days, and I made sure that you up in the north——have you not been on at all yet?”

“Not at all.”

“Weren't they a skating lot you were with?”

"They were full of something else."

"By Jove! and skating in the question! Hang me if I would let *anything* else get in my way if there was ice to be had! Where did you get your skates? Are they new ones?" He was well off the awkward topic after his own easy fashion.

"I took them out of a shop-window," said Challoner, carelessly. "They are not much, probably, but I took a fancy to them, and, as it happened, they were just my fit. I had no time to get my own from town, after receiving your brother's letter."

"No, we did not give you much time; but then we had to wait to see what the frost was going to do. It would have made us look rather small, if, after we had got you to come, there had been nothing to come for. Overton said he would not have you written to till yesterday. We half expected you yesterday, but I suppose you did not get Overton's letter in time?"

"I could not come yesterday," said Challoner, earnestly, "much as I should have liked it. But I was staying with people. I could not leave them on quite so short a notice. As it was, I had to take something very like French leave,—you got my telegram all right, I suppose?" suddenly.

"Got it yesterday afternoon."

"Ay, I sent it about three o'clock. Was it here by four?"

"Was it, Matilda? But I forgot, you were over at Endhill, and I was out too. You see we did not know when it might come, and we were half expecting you yourself, so I went to see that the ponds were all right, and Matilda to knock off the Endhills. She gets into scrapes if she——"

"And you had a good evening's work last night?" said Challoner, who interrupted on purpose, knowing that Matilda would be grateful.

"Good? Good was not the word. It was glorious; I

never saw it better; I wish you had been with us. There was such a jolly moon—but it will be still better to-night.”

“I thought of you. I guessed what you would be doing. I knew Lady Matilda was longing for a frost——”

“——So were we all.”

“And I wished I had been here to buckle on her skates for her.”

“Well, you can to-night,” said Teddy, with philosophical resignation of the envied post. This was a privilege he could bear to yield, he thought. Putting on other people’s skates is not seductive to the fraternal mind.

Still Matilda kept silence. “Did you go?” said Challoner, turning at length direct to her.

And then, as he waited for a reply, and there was no avoidance of it, and Teddy had run on, and was calling loudly to his dog, in the silence and shade of the deepest part of the garden, she had to answer “No.”

. . . They did not go in for some time after that. They sauntered up and down the crisp paths, and soon the last red streak of sun died out of the sky over the fir-tops, and one little star after another came twinkling into view,—and even then, instead of seeking shelter within doors, the three wandered off to the farm, and Challoner was shown the latest acquisitions there; and Matilda would have him to the cow-house to see how much her little heifer had grown in his three weeks’ absence, and then to the piggeries, to watch the evening meal—the steaming buckets and pails emptied into the big troughs, soon beset by hungry applicants—while all the while great empty waggons kept rumbling into the yard, from taking turnips to the frost-bound sheep in the fields,—and hens roosted, and geese and ducks clustered closer and closer together in their snug quarters for the night.

There was a rich unctuous odour pervading all; there

was a warmth and comfort and plenty and peace about the old farmyard that went straight home to Challoner's country heart ; and the contrast which the present congenial company and surroundings presented to the distasteful, and too often absolutely repugnant scenes so recently quitted, transformed him so fully for the time, made him so absolutely another being, that those who had only known the unfortunate lover under other auspices would hardly have recognised the man. His eyes burned, his cheek glowed, he talked, laughed, jested, lingered,—and although, ever since he had originally yielded to the dear delights of Overton, he had been seen to advantage there, he had never before, in his mistress's eyes, seemed so worth the winning, and so entirely won.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### ALL FORGOTTEN BUT THE PRESENT.

“Thy dark eyes threw  
Their soft persuasion on my brain,  
Charming away its dream of pain.”

—SHILLLEY.

And now for the evening, the delightful evening, which had been bought at so dear a price, and for which Challoner now prepared in a tumult of disordered and exultant feeling to which every trifling incident and association ministered.

He was here again, actually, incredibly here again ; that was first and last and everything for the moment. He had never really meant to come ; no, certainly he had never meant it, not during this past fortnight at least—not since he had sat in Mr Tufnell's little room, and heard him talk of Mary, and realised with an awful

blinding glare of realisation, that he had only been playing at freedom and folly and happiness, and that he was in actual deed a fettered, doomed captive. That half-hour, following up the previous half-awakening, had for a while forced him back from the flowery forbidden path to the hard, straight, dry road ; but he had found that road too barren for mortal man—or so he told himself—and the result was, Hurrah for Overton ! beautiful, bewitching Overton ! Every obstacle had been surmounted, every scruple and misgiving flung to the winds, and he was here—here at last.

He looked about him with kindling ecstasy when at length he was alone, and could draw a breath and estimate his bliss. They had given him his own old room, and as he drew aside the curtain and pulled up the blind, eager to gaze once more across the broad expanse of snowy upland, the moon rising full and bright, illumined nearly every part of the old-fashioned chamber, lit up the faded hangings of the bed, and irradiated the prints on the wall. How well he knew every face and form in those prints ! He had had time enough to study them inch by inch, and to be sick to death of one and all during those five days when he had been condemned to lie in bed fretfully staring at any object which was in front of him ; he had hated each severally more than the other, as each in turn engaged his irritated attention,—but now, now they came back to him as ancient enemies turned into beloved friends, chosen welcome associates. The wall-paper, the book-cases, the huge cumbrous arm-chairs, the very brass fender and fire-irons that used to be such nuisances, always clattering down and making his head ache when any one touched them, and the legs of the writing-table, that got into one's way at every turn, now seemed to wonder that he could ever have regarded them with any but the kindest eye. The blotting-

book? But no, it had ever been a fiend; no, it remained so; he drew the line there—he could not love it yet. But he would not write to Mary on this visit at all events: he was only here for such a very short time. Of course he could not tell precisely how long, but any way he should not think about it for the next day or two. Let the future be gone on this night of nights; for the present he was in paradise, and he would not mar his paradise, no, not even in thought.

And Matilda was alone when he went down-stairs presently, and he walked straight up to her in the firelight, and perhaps he told her then—but no matter, they were not talking at all when the brothers came in, but were standing mutely together on the hearth-rug, nor did either pay any special heed to the remarks of the newcomers, while Matilda took to busily placing with her own hands great logs of wood on the fire; and Challoner, watching silently, seemed to forget to help her.

They woke up by-and-by, however, and were heard lightly laughing as they led the way into the dining-room; and the dinner-table was bedecked for Christmas Eve with holly and laurustinus, and a sly branch of misletoe, which no one saw of course, and which two people at least could have done without. But nothing could come much amiss on such a night. Even a servant's stupidity must be condoned,—poor simple soul, he meant it well—and after all, what was it? By nine o'clock the moon was at her height; and though a few fleecy clouds were scattered here and there beneath the brilliant firmament, they scarce stirred in the still atmosphere, and cast no shadow anywhere. The ponds on which the ice had been guarded and tended were about half a mile from the house, on the edge of a long low wood, one bank being nearly on a level with the water, the other sloping swiftly upwards.

Three good-sized pools ran into one another almost in

a direct line; and a couple of islands near the centre of the largest seemed to cut it in two, and turn the three into four. It was on one of these islets that the brick fireplace had been constructed under Teddy's auspices; and as the time for using it arrived, a fire was lit, and two or three servants were despatched from the Hall, bearing kettles, cans, pots, and other necessities.

It was explained to Challoner, that it was not entirely on their own account that so much preparation was made.

"You must know," said Lady Matilda, "that from time immemorial, (that means since *I* came back and made them do it) Overton ponds have been free to all when the ice bears, (they are free, for that matter, when it does not), only we make this proviso, like the Cornish clergyman among the wreckers, that we 'get down, and all start fair.' We never really kept any one off till last night; but—we did last night."

"We did," said Teddy. "By Jove! we had to keep our eyes open, too. The ice would have been murdered."

"How did you manage it?"

"Oh, we had it given out that there were to be cakes and ale to-night, and every one who put in an appearance yesterday was caught by Charles. I say, look at the kettles. Matilda, I should hope you have enough kettles, at all events."

"Mrs Wadden herself bustled up to my door just now to ask at what hour she should send the second supplies."

"What do the supplies consist of?" inquired Challoner.

"Hot-pot, sausages, plum-pudding, roast potatoes. Overton skating is very popular, Mr Challoner."

"I have no doubt it is, Lady Matilda."

Challoner's skates were not so perfect in their mechanism as Teddy's; but when it was understood that they were the best he could get, and that his own were better, but were uncome-at-able on the short notice given, all were ready to find that they would do what was wanted,

and that too superior skates often resulted in no skating. For instance, even Teddy's latest acquisitions, new, glossy, and spotless,—would they work as well as Overton's, which had seen many a winter? Teddy had a business with the joints, to begin with; and although he was very anxious to display the working and prove their perfection, and though every one was willing to believe and ready to agree, his brother had perhaps a shade more confidence in his time-worn couple.

Then the little pair came under notice, and Challoner took them at once into his keeping, making fast the buckles across his arm, and jingling his own, as though he liked to hear the two in each other's company. He had a gimlet; he did not need to have one hunted out for him.

"Well, you *are* a fellow," cried Teddy. "You have everything. How on earth did you remember to bring a gimlet?"

"I knew we should want them."

"Want them. Of course, but we have lots."

"There are never too many. While you are putting on your skates, I might wish to be putting on—your sister's."

"Not your own, of course. And did you get the gimlet at Clinkton too?"

"Yes." But he wished they had not known the name of Clinkton so well. It almost made him start when now and again Teddy—for it was always Teddy—would burst out with Clinkton something or other; he could not help feeling that if—or when the news should come, the very sound of Clinkton would bring with it a terrible conviction. He put on his thick greatcoat again, thoughtfully.

But thoughtfulness wore off,—everything wore off except joyous anticipation and exhilaration as the quartet set forth, Challoner with the lady in front, the brothers'



cigars obliging them to keep a pace behind. "Just for look's sake, not because Matilda minds," explained Teddy. "It does not do for people to see," he added.

Challoner agreed, and would himself smoke—presently.

The crisp snow crackled beneath their feet as they left the path and crossed the grass towards the wood; and a very short time enabled the party to come within sight of their destination.

"Lots of people there," cried Teddy. "I say, are they on?" sharply. "No; it is only the servants crossing back and forwards to the fire. Oh, I say, look at the fire! And look at the black figures round it! Do you see them, Challoner?" calling to him. "Do you see the cannibals dancing round the blaze? Eh? Aren't they like that? Here are some more coming along behind us," turning his head. "Who can they be, I wonder? Three,—four,—four people. Oh, and I see a lot more down there, along the Scaburgh road."

"Don't speak so loud," his brother reminded him; "you forget how far the voice is carried on a night like this."

"They are far enough away. Who can they be? Matilda," running on to her—"Matilda, who can those people be? There are two ladies. It can't be the Applebys?"

Challoner's heart jumped.

"The Applebys? No; I hardly think so," replied Matilda, all unconscious. "They would not come without our sending word."

"And did you not send word?"

"Oh, never mind, Teddy, I——"

"——Do you mean to say you did not send them word?" he was pressing on by her side. "Well, I never—I thought, of course, you would send to them the first thing."

"What for? They are away,—some of them, at least, are away. Juliet——"

"—She was to come back to-day: you know that quite well."

("Then how could she be at the Clinkton ball?" thought Challoner.)

"She was not indeed, Teddy: that is to say, I—I am *quite sure* she was not."

"How can you be sure? I am not sure, and I know at least as much about the Applebys as you do. It was either to-day or to-morrow she was to come——"

"—Well, it was to-morrow then."

"It was nothing of the sort. Oh, it was too bad of you not to send. They will be awfully hurt. They always ask us whenever they have anything, and we have always asked them too, before,—always. Why did you not do it?"

Matilda did not know—did not think—did not really feel at all sure that it would have been—have been of any use. Marion had a cold——

"—Last Sunday!" cried her brother. "Nearly a week ago!"

"It is not likely she would be fit to come out at night yet."

"You might have given her the option."

"And Juliet away."

"She is not away, I tell you. She is back to-day, and we must get her somehow. I wonder what we ought to do. It is not too late to send yet."

"Oh, it is; much, *much* too late."

"Charles would be there in twenty minutes."

"He would not be there under half an hour; certainly not under half an hour, I should say three-quarters, even by the short cut."

"Well, there would still be time."

"Oh, Teddy, don't. Do let it be as it is. Do let us be content with those we have. There are plenty here," pleaded she; "why should we always have the Applebys?"

("Ay, why indeed?" thought Challoner.) "The Applebys are all very well," continued the speaker; "but Applebys year after year, morning, noon, and night, *toujours* Applebys—I am beginning to be tired of it," cried Lady Matilda, with sudden petulance. "Do, for mercy's sake, let us have one evening, one single solitary evening without the Applebys."

"Well, I call it deuced unkind," muttered Teddy. But Challoner was smiling.

"Robert was quite concerned at my coming out to-night;" there had been a full minute's pause, during which the last subject was felt to be pretty well done away with, and Lady Matilda had slipped her hand, by way of making friends, under her ill-used brother's arm. There had been a brisk advance for some paces, ere she resumed, in a fresh tone suited to a fresh topic, "Robert was not at all sure about it, I can tell you. He thought the whole thing—ah—'imprudent'; had he spoken the word that was in his heart, he would have said 'uncivilised.' I was over there yesterday, and he had heard, as he always does hear, of our intentions."

"They will not be here to-night, then?"

"They? Robert and Lotta? Robert turn out at this unearthly hour, after he has arrayed himself in his evening clothes, and brushed up his evening hair,—and Lotta lay aside her hemming and stitching, her fifteenth tuck that she is putting into baby's frock? And how could they leave the house, you know? Oh, you have no idea what an affair of state it is when the house has got to be left on the occasion of a dinner-party, or some such festivity of sufficient importance! Robert will explain to you with pleasure, if you ask him, the nature of the precautions taken: how this door is barred, and that bolted, and how all the maids sit up; and I am not sure if the baby is not exhibited at each of the windows in turn, by way of scaring the midnight robber. But as for entering

into all these solemn arrangements for anything short of a real, actual, tangible dinner-party, as for doing anything of the kind for a mere piece of child's-play like this,—oh, you surely do not suppose my sensible son-in-law capable of such frivolity.”

“And I don't believe he can skate a hang,” added Teddy.

They had now reached the ponds, round which a considerable number of expectant people had collected, and all the regret of young Lessingham for the missing Applebys instantly vanished on finding their places so well supplied. “Mrs Barnes, you here!” he cried, joyously, to a farmer's rotund dame, who, warmly wrapped and muffled, had come, nothing loath, to see the sport; “and Barnes is getting on his skates. Holloa! Johnson, I haven't seen you since last frost, I believe. You came down on purpose? That's right. Fine night, Stephen. The ice is first-rate. Matilda,” coming back to her, “I say, Matilda, there are the Miss Robinsons; do go and speak to them. They are huddling together over there, and I daresay they don't know whether to begin or not. You had better go before you get on your skates; they will take it civil. Challoner, come along and see the fire. Who is that Overton has got hold of? Oh, the rector. Oh, come, let us shake hands with the rector. Awfully glad to see you, sir; the ice is splendid: I shall look you up presently to join in some things. Now, then, Challoner,—oh, here come the Livingstons, I'll bet anything”—staring hard—“I'll bet any money that's the Livingston girls getting over the fence now. They are from Seaburgh, that lot.” Aside: “Matilda will not be over glad to see them; and between you and me, it is rather checky. They are the hotel-keeper's daughters, you know,—that big hotel at this end of the town. They had better have gone somewhere nearer there; but I hope Matilda won't be bad to them. The poor girls like the fun, I suppose; and they are go-ahead skaters, though Matilda says they

do it vulgarly. They do sprawl about rather; and you should have seen how one of them went on last year. That's the little girl who was with them then, I do believe," watching intently. "Yes, I do believe it is; and she could hardly put one foot in front of another! Well, I hope she has improved. Oh, by Jove! here are the Germans. Oh, now you will see some fun. Hie! Mr Müller, this is the best way," taking off his cap politely; "let me help Mrs Muller down the bank. There are some benches along this way, and we have put down a piece of carpet. My sister is here herself to-night. She will be on directly."

"It is so very kind to have such nice place kept," replied the German, gratefully. "Mrs Muller and myself we cannot refrain to come. We have walk all the distance. What a beautiful night!"

"And you should see that little woman going it!" said Teddy, turning back to Challoner. "They have walked here, walked over two miles, and she will skate all night, and walk back again, and think nothing of it. She skates like anything,—out and out the best woman here. I say, we may as well go on now; there is no need to wait longer: I can keep a look-out if any more come. Let us go to that bench."

"I am waiting to help your sister."

"What is she about? Where has she gone?"

"To the islands. She crossed a few minutes ago: there she is now, between us and the fire."

"Ay, seeing to things. Perhaps some of the folks would like a cup of tea or coffee before they begin. The Müllers would, I am sure. I will tell Matilda——"

"I will tell her," said Challoner. "They are waiting for you to take the lead on the ice. Look, all those people are ready, but they don't like to take it on themselves to start. You fire away, like a good fellow, and I will look after the coffee."

"We may begin now, I think," said Lord Overton, coming up at the moment. "Where's the gimlet, Ted?"

"Well, I'm using it," said Teddy.

"Here is mine," said Challoner. "I am going to hand round cups for Lady Matilda;" and he departed.

Matilda, bright and busy as the rest, made him useful at once. She was having eatables and drinkables handed round for all who chose, and many non-performers, who had been standing about for some little time, now gathered round and received steaming cups with due appreciation. Into the middle of this row presently darted Teddy with a fresh idea.

"Have you seen the slide? It is in that corner. We have given them up that corner, or else they would be a perfect nuisance, sliding about everywhere. Hie! all of you who want to slide, there's the place."

"I'll start them!" cried Challoner, and went down the slide like a schoolboy.

It was not till the sport was in full swing that Matilda had, to all appearance, time for more than a passing command for her knight. She was too intent on hospitality, too desirous of fulfilling her duties, too industrious; but the time came at last.

I will not say that longer was taken than needed to put on those pretty little skates, since every one knows that one cannot be too careful on such a point, and that the slightest carelessness may give rise to an accident; but undoubtedly no one could have accused Mr Challoner of hurrying over his task. And since, after all, the great thing is to take pains and do the thing well, regardless of time or trouble, why suggest that he might have been a trifle quicker in his movements? He was sharp enough about putting on his own. New as they were to him, he had them adjusted in a trice, and was off, and by Matilda's side ere she had been twice round the ponds; and, truth to tell, from that mo-

ment they were seldom apart for the remainder of the evening.

Happily he was not enough of a proficient to be of value to the brothers, who were performing feats in company with the rector, and who had at least the merit of doing what they did with skill and grace, and of not attempting more than they could accomplish. Challoner found Lady Matilda's powers, he vowed, quite enough for him. Figures she did not attempt; but with what marvellous ease and delicacy of motion she glided hither and thither,—how quietly, with what elegance!

"Why, yes," said Overton, to whom a remark was hazarded; "yes, Matilda skates like a lady. I like it myself; but she cannot *do* anything, you know—she cannot even go backwards. There is little Mrs Müller—I wish you had been over there just now, she was making circles most wonderfully, most beautifully,"—the quiet Overton was quite warm; "I have never seen anything more perfect," he ran on enthusiastically. "And her long backward curve, it is something to watch. Her husband is the queerest object. Look, there he goes. Round and round like a mad creature. Did you ever see such a swing as he has got on now? If he came across anything in the shadow over there, it would be a bad look-out. Always one foot high in front of the other: and those turned-up skates! There he goes—there he goes. Have you noticed him? But he enjoys himself, and that is everything. As for his wife, it is a treat to see her."

"Is that Mrs Muller you are speaking of?" said Teddy, joining them. Matilda had sat down for a moment. "Mrs Muller is in first-rate form to-night. I have been going round with her; did you see us? We passed you and Matilda just now," to Challoner.

"Your sister's skating is perfect, to my mind," said Challoner. He felt as if he must say it.

"Matilda? Oh, she goes neatly enough. She ought to strike out more though; she ought to get on more swing——"

"——She would spoil all if she did. Look at her now," as the slight dark figure was seen gliding towards them; "there is not a movement perceptible, she seems to float, to steal along involuntarily; it is the very poetry of motion,"—he stopped, deeply colouring in the darkness, and wishing he had held his tongue; the words had burned his lips. But whether or not any one else noticed, he could not tell; they both turned to Matilda, and she was herself the one to speak.

"Do you hear the bells? Listen to the bells. Had it not been for this calm still night they would not have been carried so far as here. Hark! how loud and sweet they sound!"

"They are from Westland, Lady Matilda," said the rector, coming up. "There are two more bells added to the peal, and that is how you notice them. I don't think I ever remember hearing the chime before from the ponds."

"They are in honour of Challoner," said Teddy, with a laugh. Everything, he vowed, was in honour of Challoner. On his account the ice was better, the night was brighter, the people merrier, the attendance larger, and the sport kept up later, than it had ever been before. But for him the evening would never have been half what it was. If he had not come, it would have spoilt all.

"Yes, indeed, Mr Challoner is very lucky," began the rector.

But his young friend laughed again. "It is *we*, not *he*—*we* are lucky. We just hit him off—sent for him at the right moment, and 'scored A 1,'" cried the young man, wheeling round and round the circle in little flights of exultation. "Now you see how neat the whole thing



was, and what jolly fun we are having. Could anything be better? We have nothing left to wish for——”

“——Not even the Applebys?” from Matilda.

“Bother the Applebys!” cried Teddy, quite heartily.

And how did Challoner feel under such heartiness, such warmth? It needed all his recklessness, all his effrontery, and all his passion to master at moments like this the desperate sense of shame and self-loathing evoked by the unwitting tormentor; it needed all the fumes of a new intoxication to stifle the baleful remembrance. He would have to go off alone with Matilda, to listen and look, and stun again with such narcotics the throbbing reawakened nerve; and he did. And then——, he was laughing more gaily, striking out more boldly, to all appearance enjoying the scene more thoroughly, than any.

At length the feast and the fray alike drew near an end. People cannot absolutely skate on for ever; and though it might have seemed as though the charming Mrs Muller would never have tired making more and more faultless curves, and as if the Miss Livingstons were inexhaustible in their wild excursions——while the timid were growing ever more venturesome, and the stately had unbent, and the bystanders had disappeared, and none remained but the hardy and the indefatigable,——the time at length did come when even these proved themselves human.

Challoner, who had been despatched to attend to some of the departures, returned to find Matilda quietly resting on a fallen tree by the side.

“You are tired at last?” he said, sitting down beside her.

“Tired at last. Yet as long as I was on the wing, I really could not have supposed it. It is only when one sits down that one feels it a little difficult to get up again.”

"I hope you have not done too much?"

"You shall see. To-morrow I will do it all over again."

"To-morrow?" said Challoner, dreamily — "*To-morrow?*"

He did not feel, he *knew*, that there would never be such a to-morrow for him. A cold touch seemed to be laid on his heart—a deadly chill, a mocking foreboding. No; whatever the morrow might bring of good or evil, he should never again, by Matilda's side, skim the frozen pools of Overton Hall; never again——

"Did you speak?" he said, hurriedly.

She had: had inquired the hour, had remarked upon the gradual lessening of their number, on several other things; and he had heard as though he heard not, but had at length burst forth into one long, deep, irrepressible sigh, so spontaneous, so sad, so full of tender significance, that now, feeling the moment almost too much for her, and at a loss how to bear her part in it, she was begging him to rise and lend his aid in enabling her to do the same. From the lowness of her seat she was unable to get up without a helping hand; and as she spoke she put out her own.

Challoner, still half asleep, held it—hung over it—kissed it. He scarcely knew what he was doing; that is all that can be said for him. He had a dim idea of taking leave of some fair scene, and of letting it go with a dull anguish which the presumptuous deed would soothe. It was not until aroused by the hasty withdrawal—or would-be withdrawal—of the little outraged member, and by the movement, which could be but a movement—for she could not really stir or turn, so unfortunately happy had been the moment chosen,—it was not until then, that he started to feel how deeply he had plunged. That sense was all that was needed. Like a spur, it drove him on. Again he caught the hand; how soft and warm it

felt—bare, gloveless—between his! he held it fast, and lifted his head with sullen determination.

"I shall not let this go," he said. "I—can't. See now, I——"

"Here they are! here they are!" cried a jubilant voice, as Teddy, radiant as ever, emerged from the darkness. "We thought you had given us the slip, you two; and Overton and I were just going off, when I said I would take one more look round. You had hid yourselves pretty nicely, I must say—right in the shadow over here. Well, now, are you ready to come?"

Challoner was already raising his companion, and steadying her on the glassy surface.

"I suppose they are all gone?" he said.

"Every man-Jack of them, Livingstons and all. They were the last. They want to come to-morrow," with a slight air of apprehension.

No response.

"I say, Matilda, the Livingstons want to come to-morrow."

But still he met with no answer, no objection, no demur. It seemed as if either Challoner's dim foreboding of "to-morrow" had fallen on Matilda also, or that she could not see, nor think, nor feel beyond to-night. She was wondering, almost weeping,—and all the time he was holding her hand.

Thus, under cover of the night, they crossed the ice together; and as he knelt before her ere they quitted the spot, performing again the service so delightful to a lover's heart, his lips transgressed again. No one saw; she only felt; they both alone knew.

And this was at the very moment that dear excellent Mrs Tufnell felt it to be nothing short of a sin and a shame that they should have all enjoyed themselves so much when that poor dear had been done out of it all!

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## A BAD HYPOCRITE.

"'Tis not my talent to conceal my thoughts,  
Or carry smiles and sunshine in my face  
When discontent sits heavy at my heart "

—ADDISON.

"What am I to think—what am I to think?"

Lady Matilda had dismissed her maid, and was musing over her fire ere she went to bed upon the Christmas Eve whereof so much has already been narrated.

"What am I to think?" was the refrain of all her puzzled, happy, foolish thoughts. In reality she imagined she knew very well what to think; but somehow it pleased her to be perplexed and discomposed, and affectedly vexed, and secretly more charmed with Challoner than ever. Bold, heartless, presuming man—craven caitiff—to dare so much, to stop so short; villain—coward—by turns she flouted him for this, by turns for that: in very truth she had never thought aught became him better than those extremes of presumption and modesty, those alternations betwixt forwardness and backsliding. She had heard his breathing short and thick, had caught the broken whisper, marked the catch in the throat, and felt the clasp of the hand. She had seen the revulsion, the struggle, the resolution growing apace; and then what the humility of the man doubtless termed the hold regained over his runaway passions, but which she, so superior in her knowledge of all, and contempt of all, scouted as the unwelcome and unnecessary and tiresome and provoking voice of an inward mentor, who ought by this time to have had his mouth stopped.

"Really I can show him no more plainly than I do," mused she, half sighing, half smiling; "really, my dear

Mr Challoner, it is very pretty to see you look so lugubrious, and very touching and pathetic to hear your voice tremble and shake, and to watch you force down your throat again the kind words and accents that *will* come up when poor Matilda is by. He is in love—I'd stake every womanly power I have, the man is in love. He does all that he can do, he says all that he can say, short of *the* thing, the one thing. Opportunities? He has had hosts of opportunities; he has opportunities at every turn; this whole evening was one long opportunity. Were we not together, always together, often alone together? He never left me for above a few minutes at a time, and then only when I sent him. I sent him for the pleasure of seeing him return. I could not discover so obscure a nook to fly to, but what he would track me instantly and follow; I could not be tired but he would rest too. And then he held my hand, and kissed it twice. Yes, he kissed it just here, and held the place afterwards. What right had he to hold it and yet not a word, not a single word? Oh," with a burst, "I like his silence—I love his silence. His silence is more, a thousand times more to me than any other man's speech. He shall be silent, silent as the grave, silent for evermore, if so he pleases, once he has spoken out. Poor man," mocking, "poor—dear—*blind* man. Matilda is too good for you, is she? Too beautiful, too rich, too highly born? Oh dear, yes, she is all that, we know very well; but stop a little, my friend, you will find she is too *clever* also. You are not clever, Mr Challoner—not particularly clever, at least; and certainly you are not beautiful, and probably you are not rich. I wonder what you are, or why I—— Pshaw! you *shall* speak, sir; I say you shall. You have no right now to hold your tongue, and hang your head, and put your finger in your mouth like a baby. Baby? It is I that am the baby to let him play with me thus. He sees, he knows his power, and abuses

it. He shall not, he shall not," excitedly. "I—oh, if I can but preserve this bold heart when I am with him, if I can but keep a merry heart and tongue, and cheat him with my face. Let me see,—can it be that I have been too soft and yielding? Perhaps I have. Then how remedy the damage? Coquet with another? But there is no one else to coquet with except Robert, and one might as well dance round a tombstone. No, no; no coquetting. No; I must be all in all to myself and by myself. I will amuse myself, be good friends with myself, and have no need of any one but myself. I will send the gentlemen about their business. It will be fit for them to go out of doors to-morrow; but it shall be too cold, or too wet, or too early, or too late, or too anything, for me. They will have to excuse me. Then I will—shall I have a headache? But a headache of that kind is missyish and vulgar; headache is unbecoming, too, and troublesome to manage. So I will be just myself—myself as I am when this wicked Jem Challoner is not by; a much better self in reality than the self that appears for him,—a silly subdued shadow of the real Matilda. What can he see in her to fancy, I wonder? But these mild soft-eyed impostors, these abominable hypocritical make-believes of men, one never knows what they do *not* see. Well, Mr Challoner, you have done so well that you deserve to do better still; and so, to bed, Matilda, my dear," gaily saluting the mirror as she passed. "Good night, my poor, little, ill-used, tormented, tantalised Matilda,—enter to-morrow morning, *Her Ladyship*."

And accordingly her ladyship drew up her long neck like a swan when she received Mr Challoner's morning greeting, received it gently and gracefully as usual, including all in her Christmas greeting and good wishes; but the guest, who was himself rather pale, since even the cold night air and late exercise had failed to procure him more than a short portion of hurried feverish sleep,

Challoner noticed that she did not meet his eager eye, and answered but lightly his earnest inquiries.

She was almost as much occupied about the non-arrival of the post-boy as he was, and surely with not half so good a cause. The news from the outer world could mean nothing to her, wrapped as she was and must be in the one thought; but for him it was different,—his was fear, and fear he must. He breathed again when it was made known that the mails had been delayed, and no one could say when they might arrive: a heavy snow-storm had set in in the north.

Then Teddy proposed the ice again, but Matilda excused herself on the plea of fatigue; and though she resisted, on the same ground, the allurements of the billiard-room, the insensate one for whom the whole ridiculous little pretence was got up, saw nothing amiss; it was not to be expected that she should be at their beck and call (as Teddy seemed to expect), and he had the whole day before him. Off he went to the kennels with the brothers for the morning cigar; and Lady Matilda, looking after them, felt that she had done nothing, that she never could do anything steadily and resolutely against Challoner. She laughed at herself, and longed for a chance of undoing the little she had attempted.

It came after a time: an hour or two later the billiard-balls were heard going, and the post came in.

"Oh, Teddy, what do you think?" cried Matilda, entering the billiard-room with an open letter in her hand. "The bag has just come; there is nothing for you, Mr Challoner,"—in parenthesis. "What do you think, Teddy? This is from Marion Appleby," (Challoner, whose stroke it was, lifted his cue, and took position; naturally Marion Appleby's note could not concern him); "she has just heard from the people Juliet is with;—you know I told you Juliet was still away, and you would not believe me——"

"——Well?" said Teddy, watching his opponent's deliberate aim, and on this account only half interested even in his dear Applebys, — "well? What about Juliet?"

"Oh, poor Juliet, I am so sorry for her! they have only just heard, and sent this note to tell us. Poor Juliet has taken small-pox."

The cue slid along Challoner's finger, and a brilliant winning hazard was followed by an almost impossible cannon.

"Bravo!" cried Lady Matilda, looking round with a smile. "Bravo!" And then she whispered to herself that the very sound of her voice sent the blood to her lover's cheek and the light to his eye. He did not seek a fresh position, nor follow up the run; he left his place and came towards her, as though drawn by a magnet: and when she asked why he did not go on, laughed and had no answer.

Teddy, however, was full of the Applebys again. He wanted to know everything, to see the note, to hear what was going to be done, who was going to nurse the sufferer? Whereat Challoner turned away again, for he had not thought of that.

"We must call and inquire," wound up young Lessingham, profoundly.

"I can write, which will be better," corrected his sister. "I shall send a note of sympathy at once."

"Ay, very well; send a note if you like. But we must call and inquire, all the same. We must call this afternoon."

"And inquire—for whom?"

"For Juliet, of course."

"But they can know nothing more yet. We know as much as they do at present. There has only been a telegram——"

"And surely a telegram is enough? I do wonder at



you, Matilda; you never think of things unless I remind you. You would let poor Juliet be as ill as she could be without ever calling to inquire, just because the news came by telegram. I suppose it is all because you don't want to go."

"I do not want to go, certainly; but," relenting, "but, my dear Ted, I will go, if you wish it. We will all go. We can walk over after luncheon. Will you come, Mr Challoner? Unless, indeed, you would prefer——, of course, Overton never makes afternoon calls, so do not feel yourself the least obliged."

"Not at all. I do not feel in the least *obliged*."

"And you will just please yourself?"

"And I shall—just please myself."

She understood: and the glance he received was so arch, so sweet, so apprehensive, that the speaker threw down his cue, with "I am for Matilda, for Matilda before all the world," blazoned unmistakably in his eye and on his brow. She turned to depart.

"Aren't you going on?" cried poor Teddy, who saw himself about to be left without an antagonist.

"My dear fellow, your sister wants me," drawled his friend over his shoulder. "She told me to 'please myself,' and this is how I 'please myself,'" aside to her. "We are going to have some music, aren't we? Give you your revenge before dinner, Ted," following Matilda from the room. "Don't think you were going to win, my dear boy."

"You have the devil's own luck in everything, I do believe," was the rejoinder, but it was spoken to empty walls. Teddy was alone, he was deserted; for the first time in his life he felt angry with Challoner, and that anger was not without fruits in the evil day to come.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

## HOPE AGAIN.

"Hope, without action, is a barren undoer."

—FELTHAM.

"And all my days are trances,  
And all my nightly dreams  
Are where thy dark eye glances,  
And where thy footstep gleams."

—E. A. POE.

We left poor Teddy Lessingham disconsolately knocking about the billiard-balls, in full possession of which he had been left by the desertion of the faithless Challoner; and heartily did he wish, as many another has wished before him, that the damaging strokes and brilliant runs which came so easy when no one was by, and when no game was on, would sometimes fall to his lot when they could be of any real value. He never could make head against an enemy—he could always win by himself. Just now, when his mind was full of Challoner and Matilda, and, moreover, of poor sick Juliet Appleby, he played like one possessed by the very genius of the game; he really wondered at himself; and insensibly grew colloquial and profound, as Teddy always did when under a soothing influence.

"Well, now, they will take it very civil of us to go over to the Applebys' this afternoon—they will think it quite the right thing; and if only Matilda and I could have gone alone—but I suppose we could hardly do that. Anyway, I shall take the flower out of my button-hole"—he had put in a Christmas rose—"it would not look at all correct to be calling to inquire after poor Juliet with a flower in my button-hole. Challoner may keep his in—I daresay he will. Let him—the Applebys are nothing to him; it was all very fine his looking so concerned and

all that just now; he put it on to please Matilda—and, of course, he is quite right to please Matilda—but he can't take *me* in. Too sharp for that dodge, *I* am. Well, now, I am glad I thought about calling, anyway; and I must take care that they know it was I who thought of it. I wish there was something else I could do. I must ask Mrs Appleby or Marion if there is not anything. Marion will put me up to it if there is. Matilda is no good on an occasion of this sort: she is flighty—that's why. There," having succeeded at last in extracting the rose—"there, Matilda would never have thought of that. I do believe now that if Robert were to die, she would go to inquire for him with a whole peacock's tail waving from her hat. Unless I caught her, that is the very thing she would go and do."

At luncheon he was full of the same reflections, and ready to communicate such as he deemed fit. "I hope the Applebys will be in," he said, taking jelly with his venison.

"You are going to the Applebys'?" said Overton. "Oh! It will snow, you know."

"So I have thought all the morning," Challoner agreed with him. "Lady Matilda thinks otherwise; she has made up her mind to have another night on the ice."

"There will be no skating to-night, or I am mistaken," replied Lord Overton, who was a student of weather. "I have had my walk; I went out early, to make sure; but if you are only going as far as the Applebys', a little snow will not matter. Are you going to invite them here, or anything?"

"Invite them here! Good gracious! have you not heard—not heard about poor Juliet?" gasped Teddy.

"—Eh? About Juliet? Oh yes, poor Juliet. I am very sorry," said his brother. "Bread, please," to the footman.

"'Pon my word, you take it coolly," rejoined Teddy,

now really aggrieved. "How would you like to have small-pox yourself, I wonder? Small-pox! just fancy! It is about the beastliest thing anybody can have, and I don't suppose you are even going to inquire, or—or anything," looking down at his unadorned coat; "neither you nor Challoner care a bit," resentfully.

"Dear Teddy, it will do if we take Overton's card," put in Lady Matilda, a shade of anxiety in her tone and look, for she knew how rapidly the horizon might be overcast were an impending storm not averted at the outset. "We can take Overton's card; he never does call anywhere, you know."

"Take my card, by all means, if you can find one," said Overton; "I wonder where they are? I have not seen any since——"

"My dear man, I have them; Mr Challoner will think us dreadful barbarians," cried Matilda, laughing to their guest; "we really have not much manners among us, Mr Challoner——"

"——What on earth do you mean?" burst forth Teddy in his angriest voice. . . . .

"I am afraid he is not going to be good," said Matilda, following Overton apart presently. "I am rather afraid of Teddy to-day. It is the reaction after last night; you know how little he can stand, and anything the least out of his usual way always tells upon him. He did too much last night, and was over-excited and over-heated; to-day he is feeling out of sorts in consequence. Poor dear boy! I do hope, I do trust," apprehensively—"Overton, what *shall* we do if he has one of his bad turns now? It would be so very, so particularly unfortunate."

"I think," replied he quietly, "you had better not take him with you this afternoon."

"Not take him to the Applebys'! My dear Overton, it was he who proposed going. It is his own especial expedition. Nothing would induce him to stay behind."

"Then you had better leave Challoner."

She was silent.

"I really mean it," said Overton.

"But—I don't understand."

"Yes; I think you do. Now, take my advice; leave behind one or the other. If Teddy will not stay, make Challoner."

"And suppose he won't be made?"

"Then you must stay yourself."

That, however, was not to be borne. The walk was just what she wanted, and just what she knew Challoner wanted; and whatever Overton might hint about Teddy's jealousy—she supposed that was what he meant—well, surely she could manage her own Teddy. She had done so hitherto with consummate success. Only on one occasion during Challoner's first visit had any ill feeling ever broken out in public, though none knew better than herself how often it had had to be charmed away in private, and how many fond words, attentions, and consolations had gone to keeping her poor boy in that mind towards his friend, which made him still think Matilda's lover the best of fellows and good companions. That a mood was now imminent, and that it would require care, tact, and patience on her part to avert it, was plain; but, alas! Teddy was now no longer the first. For his sake she knew she ought to have stayed at home. She ought not, for any pleasure of her own, to have run the risk of rousing further his already disturbed emotions and suspicions; but Challoner wished her to go—and she went.

Overton came to the door to see the party start. He showed no displeasure at having had his advice disregarded; indeed he felt none. In the depths of his heart he was strangely touched and moved by this very disobedience and pertinacity on the part of one who usually was only too ready to fall in with his slightest suggestion directly anything was wrong with their common

charge; and there was an almost visible tenderness and wistfulness in his look and voice, as he stepped forward to his sister's side and saw how the other side was claimed. Was there anything he could do for her?—any way in which he could help her?

"Take care of her, Challoner; take care of her," he said again and again, and involuntarily his hand pressed Matilda's arm as he spoke; then, as if afraid of having betrayed his inward thoughts by such earnestness, "I do not like the look of the day. The clouds are banking up in the north. There will be a heavy snowstorm before long, and the snow will lie when it falls."

"Ha!" cried Challoner, exultation in his tone. "Snow, do you say? Three feet of snow round Overton Hall! I, for one, wish for no better luck." He was in spirits so gay, and monopolised the conversation so entirely, that the ill-fated third person, to whom neither query nor response was made, and who would not laugh at jests with which he had nothing to do, found fresh fault with his companions and their society at every step. What an abominable afternoon it had turned out! How infernally dark the sky was! What a devil of a state the roads were in! Well knowing what such language meant, and why expressions were thus made use of, which she had long ago forbidden, and which had in consequence dropped out of Teddy's vocabulary, and were never heard except as birds of evil omen, Matilda could but turn a deaf ear and give herself more and more to Challoner as the walk went on. It was no time to speak to Teddy now; not by the gentlest whisper durst she risk an outbreak, and she would not, even to herself, allow that she had been to blame in bringing about the situation. No, she had *not* been to blame; a brother must sometimes go to the wall; she had but few pleasures, and this—this was more than any mere passing enjoyment; it meant—who could say what it might not mean? Challoner had asked her

to go, and at such a time she could not afford to refuse his slightest request, nor seem to disregard anything that was to him a subject for hope or fear. Was he not already enough troubled with misgivings? She read *that* in his eye and voice, which made every trifle of importance; the anxiety he could not hide, the agitation, the tremor, the one thought of his breast, which was at length become too dominant for any effort to conceal it, all wrought in her a kindred emotion, and an indifference to aught beside what passed between them two.

And this indifference was dreadful to poor Teddy, dimly as he might perceive it. He felt that something was wrong; he was, as Matilda had said, out of sorts, the reaction from two days' severe exercise and turbulent jollity; and what he would now have liked to have done more than anything would have been to have taken himself off then and there, and left the all-engrossed pair to themselves for the rest of the way. Nothing but the difficulty of presenting himself at the Applebys' door all alone—he who never went anywhere alone—prevented this: that staggered him; no, he could not do that.

Yet how he wished he could. To see Challoner walking backwards over every inch of frozen puddle in order to hold both Matilda's hands and guide her steps—to see him taking out his pocket-handkerchief to wipe every stile she had to cross, lest even the skirts of her dress should be touched by the powder of frost which lay crisp on the top bar, it was too ridiculous,—Matilda, who did not care where she went, nor what a state her petticoats were in when she was out alone with him on a wintry scramble like this. He wished Challoner had only beheld her when she came home from Endhill, two days before.

"Pooh! what is all the fuss about?" he protested crossly, being indeed driven to his wits' end, when a slippery ditch being in the way—a ditch that he knew

Matilda could have cleared like a deer had she chosen—she must needs be drawn delicately across with many a little cry of alarm and need of encouragement and support at every step. And he had himself her muff given him to hold, and must perforce stand by with his disgusted face, quite unobserved and uncommented upon, while all this went on!

“It’s a deuced pity you came,” he averred at length, looking the helpless lady straight in the face; and as the colour rose in her cheek, he knew he had hurt her at last.

That was something, but unhappily it did not do all that it was intended; it might silence for the moment, it might cast a passing shadow, but Challoner with a lover’s sympathy was soon able by a lover’s wiles to soften every blow that had not been of his own giving, and all went on as before. Poor Teddy, he was very powerless; he tried to make himself disagreeable, and no one found it out; he would fain have made himself scarce, but that would have been cutting his own throat. As it was, however, he bounced out of sight whenever and wherever he could; now running across a field wherein was a pond whose ice might be superior to their own; now taking a turn round by a farm to have a word with the farmer whom he espied in the background; now hailing a labourer going past with a waggon,—anything and everything to force himself into notice, and be, if only in tormenting, of consequence. What was it to him that Matilda had to wait on the bleakest point of the common while he explored a rat-hole, and why should he care whether she “thought she had lost him” or not, when he disappeared for so long behind Luke Hayfield’s farm-buildings? She would be willing enough to “lose” him; and if it were not for the Applebys—and the poor fellow’s heart swelled within him.

Once within the Applebys’ door, however, there was an improvement: here he was on his own ground, here



he was always made much of; and after the privations of the way, it was something to be still some one anywhere.

He had fallen from his high estate with Matilda; was it not only too probable that he had fallen for evermore? If it had only been a temporary thing, a piece of womanish nonsense, Matilda had now and again been ridiculous before, but she had always come quickly and gladly back to her Teddy, laughing at herself, and making merry at her own expense; but now—now,—and he shook his head angrily and miserably. How easy it had been to say, “You must marry again,” when no marrying again seemed ever likely to come to pass; but how detestable and ominous sounded his own advice in his own ears now! His heart was sore, and had been sore for exactly four hours,—ever since twelve o’clock, in short, when he and billiards had been thrown over for love and Matilda; that had opened his eyes at last, and the only wonder was, as every one will perceive, that they had not been opened long before.

In Mrs Appleby’s drawing-room, however, the young visitor was urbanity itself. “I can’t tell you how sorry we were,” he said: “it took us quite by surprise; I assure you it did—quite by surprise. We had no idea of such a thing; and when Marion’s note came in, Matilda was so astonished—you can’t think how astonished she was. We wondered what it was about, you know; and then we said—*I* said, we must come and inquire at once.”

“So kind,” replied Mrs Appleby, a faded prototype of what Juliet would certainly become. “Lady Matilda is always so kind. Directly the sad news came, we sent to let her know, because we felt so sure——”

“——Mr Challoner has just come from Clinkton,” said Lady Matilda, sympathetically; “he only came yesterday.”

“Indeed! From Clinkton? And did you see my

daughter, sir?" turning to him. "She was often in the town, I believe, though our friends, the Windlasses, with whom she is staying—and where she has been taken ill, poor child,—live four or five miles out in the country."

"I saw Miss Appleby once or twice, but she did not see me," replied he. "Clinkton is a large place, and," he drew near to Mrs Appleby, as Lady Matilda stepped aside with Marion, "we were in different circles. She did not mention me, I suppose?"

"Not that I remember. Marion," but Marion did not hear.

"What a view you have from this window!" cried Challoner, "what an extent of country!——"

"——Very pretty; but," said Mrs Appleby, possessed of but one idea for the time—"but you were speaking of Clinkton. Do you know Clinkton well? Do you know the Windlasses? Had you heard about the fancy ball?"

Had he not? He had heard of little else.

"Well, she had been going to that," proceeded his hostess, reading an affirmative in his face, "and a very smart ball it was, I fancy," with the usual habit of making the most of anything at a distance; "a very smart ball, and my poor Juliet would have much enjoyed it. But only yesterday,—and the ball was last night, you know——"

"——Did she go?" demanded Challoner, suddenly.

"Dear me! no, Mr Challoner; how could she go when she was lying ill of the small-pox? She was taken ill only a few hours before, though I daresay we shall hear presently, when the post comes in, that——"

"How very unlucky!" He was listening with all ears to Lady Matilda now, and Mrs Appleby lost him from that moment.

"You will not surely go yourself?" Lady Matilda was saying.

"I shall indeed,—at least I should, if only mamma would allow me. But she will not. Neither she nor papa will hear of it."

"And they are quite right, Marion." And then followed reason and argument, encouragement and consolation.

"And now you will just stay with a quiet mind," concluded Matilda, rising. "Promise that you will, dear."

("With a quiet mind, or not," said Challoner, sardonically to himself. "I do not insist on that adjunct at all, my dear Miss Appleby. Only be good enough to stay, and I leave it entirely to you to regulate the quietude of your mind.")

He had learned all he wanted to know, and nothing had been said that he did not wish to hear. Now he did not care how soon the visit came to a close. Juliet powerless, her family ignorant, Marion prevented going, the Windlasses prevented telling,—he could scarcely believe his own ears, as one thing after another dropped out, as if to strengthen his temptation, and make him more and more secure on the edge of his precipice; for so entirely had his fears of late centred on the Appleby family, or, at least, on one member of it, that, thus unexpectedly relieved, it almost seemed as if he could be assailed from no other quarter. Oh, something might, could, should yet be dared and done! Hope was again desperately rearing its unabashed front.

"Mr Challoner, you have been standing in that cold corner for ever so long," said Mrs Appleby's languid voice from the sofa. "Do come nearer the fire; do, Marion, dear, poke up the fire. Oh, thank you," to Teddy, who seized the poker. "So good of you all to come out in such weather."

"The most glorious weather, my dear Mrs Appleby. I wish you had been with us last night," cried Matilda, coming forward; and as she did so, and then seated her-

self at the invalid's feet, for the few civilities preparatory to departure, her brother seized his opportunity.

"Marion—I say, Marion, I wish you would tell me if there is anything I can do," said he, drawing her aside confidentially. "Can't I do *anything*? Are you going to Clinkton? Let me go to Clinkton with you; I'll go any time like a shot. Now, mind, you ask me if you want me. You need not say anything to any of them, just send word to me," and he shook her hand a dozen times. (If Challoner had only heard him!)

But Challoner's attention was concentrated on Matilda, and *her* parting; and having at length got her safely out of the house, he was now only bent on making the most of his fresh reprieve.

"Good-bye; I'm off to Seaburgh. I have a telegram to take for Marion," announced Teddy, triumphantly. "She has intrusted it to me, and I have promised to go and send it off myself,"—his tone intimating, "Other people think much of me, if you do not."

"Don't be astonished if I am late," he added, having invariably found that this was what Matilda minded more than anything.

Ah! Matilda hardly noticed it now.

The prophesied snow, though it fell fast and thick after the light went, did not set in soon enough to hinder any one from walking as swiftly as he or she chose before then; nevertheless, when Lord Overton overtook his sister and Challoner within the park, having gone out again himself as the sky kept up, it was not soon after they had parted from their other companion; an hour or more had elapsed. They had not hurried; they had not come quite straight home. There had been time for anything, and yet there was nothing to tell.

"This is rather curious," said Overton to himself.

## CHAPTER XXX.

## MRS TUFNELL IN TROUBLE.

"Slips of the tongue are sometimes found very inconvenient by those persons who, owing to some unlucky want of correspondence between their wits and their utterance, say one thing when they mean another, or bawl out something which the slightest degree of forethought would have kept unsaid."—SOUTHEY.

Everybody at Clinkton was now thinking about Juliet Appleby. The insignificant Juliet who, a few days before, had been of less than no consequence to the world in general, and who had simply gained a superficial importance in the eyes of one or two people by peculiar circumstances, was now a personage to be thought about and spoken about, and inquired after, — was, in fact, next to the fancy ball, if not actually before it, in point of interest in many houses, whose inmates had not until within the past twenty-four hours known of the young lady's existence. A little goes a long way with the gossips of a country town; and much as the poor girl's unfortunate illness might be to her own people, and much also in a lesser degree to their friends and neighbours at Overton Hall, it was undoubtedly still more the topic of the day to those upon the spot, to the hosts who were to be sympathised with, and to the circle who could condole, and pity, and wonder, and have daily and hourly bulletins. To them, as was natural, the subject was all-engrossing. Showers of cards were left daily. People who had not previously been on visiting terms with the Windlasses seized the opportunity for driving up to the Court, while the more modest contented themselves with gaining intelligence of these bolder spirits, and retailing it to those who were again indebted to them for the same. At every meeting the first question would be—"Do you know how Miss Appleby is to-day? Has she passed a

better night?" or, "I trust we shall hear an improved account to-morrow. The Windlasses tell me so-and-so." It was something to get at the Windlasses anyhow.

"I wonder how Miss Juliet Appleby is to-day," observed Mary Tufnell one morning. "I think I shall go round and ask Miss Beadel; she is sure to know."

"It strikes me there is a tremendous to-do made about this Miss Juliet Appleby," struck in her father, somewhat gruffly. "It is nothing but Miss Juliet Appleby from morning till night from every one now. Because the girl has got the small-pox——"

"——Sure that is enough, papa."

"Enough? I did not say it wasn't. Enough and to spare, I daresay, for her and those about her; but what is that to *us*? What the mischief have we to do with Miss Juliet Appleby, small-pox or no small-pox? She is nothing to us, and we are nothing to her."

"Oh, the poor thing, I am so sorry for her! I am sure I never was so sorry for any one in my life," said Mary, with the easy healthy sorrow that comes natural to a fine girl, and does not in any wise impair her digestion. "It is so hard upon her, and——"

"——Well, of course; and hard upon the folks she is with too; and of course I am sorry myself for that matter, and wish 'em well through with it, but I don't see how it need concern *us*. *We* are not the Applebys nor the Windlasses; we have nothing to do with them or their set, any more than we have with Jones the butcher, or Japhet the turnpike-keeper,—not so much, for we know those two a deal better than we know the others,—yet I'll be hanged if I should hear all this fuss made if poor Mrs Jones or Mrs Japhet was taken sick."

"La! I am sure I should be very vexed to hear anything was the matter with either," said his wife, entering in time to catch the last remark. "What put such a

thing into your head, my dear? Now was not that papa all over?" to her daughter. "Papa thinks we have no right to take an interest in our neighbours——"

"Precious little interest they have ever taken in us!"

"——And the poor thing to lose her ball too——"

"Her ball! what do you mean by *her* ball? The ball was not good enough for her friends, forsooth; the Windlasses turned up their noses at it to my certain knowledge; and yet they tried to edge in this shrimp of a miss, who wanted to turn us all into ridicule——"

"Well, I never! Now, papa," cried his wife, "now you really must not say any such things; you do not mean them——"

"——But I do."

"——No, no; no, you don't; not a bit of you. We all know papa, Mary; but really," in some alarm,— "really I would not have any one else—Miss Beadel, or the Dobbs, or any one—hear him for the world; for he is so severe,"—her gentle tones might have mollified an ogre.

Tufnell, however, was in a bad humour. "They may hear me for half a groat," he said obstinately; "they may hear every word I say, and I mean every word I say. It is more than a man can stand, the folly of these gossips of yours; in and out all day long, with 'Pray have you heard how Miss Juliet Appleby is within the last five minutes?' or, 'How many dozen times have you inquired to-day?' The girl is not dying, or there might be some sense in it. I do not wish her to die——"

"——Papa!"

"——Well, 'Papa!'—I *say* I don't wish her to die. But, upon my word, I should not cry my eyes out if she had a few marks left upon her face. It would take some of the conceit out of her, coming down here, and fancying she was going to turn the heads of all the young men at our ball—at *her* ball, as you choose to call it, ma'am," to

his wife ; "forcing herself in on purpose to cut out our daughters—country bumpkins as I daresay she thinks them ; wish she might not be glad to have some of the country bumpkins' skins and colour once she comes out of her small-pox, that's all !"

"Oh, now you are vindictive, my dear. You would not surely have the poor girl all over pock-marks ? Oh Lor' ! I could not have believed it of you, Tufnell. The very idea gives me a turn. Mary, my dear—oh, you are writing."

"What is it, mamma ?"

"Just could you step down to the Hales' before you take off your bonnet,—or maybe I'll go myself,"—pondering.

"What for ?"

"I daresay I'll go myself. It will do in the afternoon. I thought I would just like to hear," speaking aloud her thoughts—"I would just like to hear how Miss Juliet Appleby——"

"——Damn Miss Juliet Appleby !" roared her husband, bouncing to his feet and banging from the room. "There is no cutting out a woman's tongue ! I thought I had——." The rest was lost.

"Dear me ! papa is in a way," observed Mrs Tufnell, placidly. "Well, I was a noodle to slip it out, but I had clean forgot—and who would have believed it of papa ? Something has disagreed with his stomach this morning, I'll be bound. He has been cross ever since he got up, poor man. Well now, Mary, he won't like me to go, you see ; so if you don't mind, just you run down and get the last news. It is all very well for papa to be so hard-hearted, but I know I feel just as if she was one of my own, and——"

"——And I too," said Mary, briskly. "I'll go, mamma. I'll go at once. I was only writing to Jem : I forgot to write both yesterday and Monday, and the day



before was Sunday, and it was not worth while on Saturday, being so soon after he left,—so he has not heard a word about the ball yet.”

“Never!” exclaimed her mother, reproachfully. “You never say so! I would not take you away for millions then——”

“Oh, never mind; *he* won’t,” said Mary, laughing. “We agreed at the first that we were not to be bothered with many letters. I hate writing, and so does Jem; you see he has not sent me a line yet, either.”

“Ah, but he has had nothing to write about, poor thing. It is you who have had all the pleasure, and of course he will want to hear about it. I never like any one I care for to feel about me that ‘out of sight is out of mind,’” said Mrs Tufnell, shaking her benevolent head. “Poor Jem! I was kind of afraid from the first that something would happen to take off the edge of that ball. It seemed as if we were all too much taken up about it. I am sure I for one had it a great deal more in my mind than I should have had; I daresay,” with compunction — “I daresay even Mrs Dobb, who had the whole thing on her shoulders, did not think more about it than I did,—but there, even papa was in a fuss over his pantaloons; and as for you girls—but you had your disappointment, poor Mary——”

“Oh, as to that, as Jem did not care himself, no more did I—much,” said Mary. “I think it will do just as well to send this to-morrow as to-day, mamma, so I will go to the Hales’ if you like——”

“The Hales? I have just come up from the Hales’,” said a new voice in the doorway. “Was Mary going? Well, you needn’t, then; they are all out: I caught them just going out. I thought I would go in to ask after Miss Juliet Appleby——”

“And how is she?”

“Oh, much the same. No better, anyway. The Hales

are going out to inquire in the afternoon. I went in after cathedral——”

“Oh, you have been at cathedral?”

“Oh, I have been at cathedral—very much at cathedral. Well, somebody had to go,” said Bertha, in her natural voice; “we could not let poor Emmy go always alone, and these Christmas services are such a point with Herbert——”

“——Poor dear, I hope she will not have to go through that always,” observed their mother, somewhat anxiously. “I do think poor Emmy has rather a hard time of it in that respect. Herbert,—well, they say a lover may be as exacting as he pleases; but really morning and afternoon too——”

“——Sh! Take care. I will tell you what I think,” said Bertha, slyly. “Herbert is like the fox with his tail cut off; having to go himself, he would like to let us all in for it too, if he could.”

“Well, dear me, let us remember what we are talking about; don’t let us be profane, whatever we are,” Mrs Tufnell reminded them; “but the truth is, I was never brought up to church-going except on Sundays, and it does not come natural to me now. I don’t say there is any harm in it; I would never go the length of saying that; but I know this, I get no good of Emily at all nowadays; she can never go with me anywhere of an afternoon without being all upon thorns as four o’clock comes on. If I have her for a drive—and she used to be the only one of you that I could ever get to set a foot in the carriage—she is looking at her watch all the time, and I’m kept in a state myself for fear we should be late; and then I have always to come back that way, round by the Close, you know,—and as sure as fate, if Emily is with me, it happens that I would like to come back the other way. Well, between it all, the hurry, and the fidget, and the feeling that Emily, poor thing, thinks it

not quite kind of me to come on home and let her go in by herself, I must own I do feel more put about than I'd like her to know. Often and often I would rather go alone; and really if it is to be morning as well as afternoon services——"

"——Oh, but it won't; not after this week and next," said Bertha, reassuringly; "and no doubt, once they are married, we shall hear no more of it. Now, do listen to me. I have had quite an adventure this morning; I have had an introduction, and made a new friend. It was at the Hales'. There was such a lovely young man at the Hales'. And Mary, I have the honour to inform you," with a flourish, "that the lovely young man is a friend of your lovely young man. Mind, Mary, one good turn deserves another. I have always aided and abetted you with Jem Challoner, and now I shall claim return in kind from you. I have an idea that Jem's friend and I are kindred spirits. He appeared about as friendly a youth as I have ever had the luck to meet. And he was, oh, a very, very long way better-looking than—no offence, Mary—than either Jem or Herbert. Jem does not set up to be a beauty. He has *l'air distingué*, and that sort of thing—the *je ne sais quoi*, and all the rest of it. Herbert is pretty, I own; but my man——"

"How you do run on, child!" said her sister, with a shrug of the shoulder—"your man!"

"Ay, my dear, my man; surely I may call him mine until he is claimed by somebody else. My man has a nose—oh, such a nose! Grecian to a degree,—that's to say if it's not Roman," in parenthesis. "I'm not altogether clear about the two in my own mind, but at any rate it is a nose of the first water—a nose to put any other nose I have ever seen, in Clinkton or elsewhere, out of joint for ever and aye; and he has curly locks and a moustache, and—and everything. I made my best bow, and he talked to me the whole time I was there; he

did, indeed. I do like making a new acquaintance; I wish I had heard his name——”

“——You did not even hear his name! And you call that making a new acquaintance!”

“He heard mine; that was enough; he heard, and he made good use of his hearing. He called me ‘Miss Tufnell’ several times, and inquired whether it was I or my sister,—I heard him distinctly ask Louisa Hale whether it was I or my sister who was going to be married to his friend Mr Challoner? When Louisa said it was you, he spoke to me myself about it.”

“What did he say?”

“Say? All sorts of things. Asked when it was to be? And how long you had been engaged? He was most particular to know how long you had been engaged.”

“Had he not heard?”

“Apparently not. It was quite laughable. He made me repeat it; and when I said ‘Since last September,’ he exclaimed after me, ‘Since last September!’ as if it were something quite surprising. He was immensely interested; he asked all sorts of questions; and when I chaffed him about his being so ignorant himself, he only looked foolish, and had not a word to say. Evidently Jem had not taken him into confidence. Talking dispassionately of Jem, I should not say he takes many people into confidence.”

“You did not hear who this man was?”

“Of course they said his name, but I did not catch it. Louisa does sometimes mumble so that no one can hear her, and they all seemed rather stupid and flustered. He was their brother’s friend, you see, not theirs; and to tell the truth, I don’t fancy they knew much about him. If only that brother of theirs had come in! Tiresome creature; *he* would have been of some good. As it was, I could not get hold of any one of the girls to inquire, and I had to leave before any one else did; however, I

shall go down this afternoon, for I have left the library books behind me. A piece of luck, isn't it? Nobody can say I go to find out who my new friend is."

"Nor to meet him again?"

"Oh, there is no hope of that; he is off immediately—off for London by the first train this afternoon: he had only looked in for an hour, as he happened to be passing through Clinkton on his way from somewhere or other. He had slept at the Station Hotel last night, so he must have come from a distance; then he had walked up to call on the Hales, and his train was to leave about now."

Later on in the day she rushed in with scarce a breath left.

"Mary, Mary! what *do* you think? Oh, Mary! what *will* you say? He is a prince in disguise, an earl's son, and will be the earl himself some day, for his brother is not married, and he is the heir. The Hales' brother has told them all about him since I was there in the morning, and they say he is *such* a friend of Jem's, and that he is sure to be Jem's best-man at the wedding. He is the Honourable Edward Lessingham. Think of me and the Honourable Edward Lessingham!"

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### NO ONE NOTICES TEDDY.

"'Tis an ill cure  
For life's worst ills, to have no time to feel them;  
When sorrow's held intrusive and turned out."

—PHILIP VON ARTEVELDE.

It was indeed our old friend Teddy, who, alone and unauthorised, but rising to the occasion from sheer extremity of need and singleness of purpose, had thus

appeared on the scene in those far-away regions to see and hear for himself if such things as had been told him of Jem Challoner were true.

Who had told? Not the Applebys. After all that had been undergone and suffered and apprehended from them, they had done nothing; they had been harmless as infants. It was entirely through another channel,—but let us go back to twenty-four hours before the accidental meeting of Bertha Tufnell with the stranger in the Hales' drawing-room.

For three whole days had Teddy's sulking fit continued, the mood having begun as we know on the morning following the moonlight skating on the ponds, having set in with severity during the afternoon walk, and having culminated after an entire evening had elapsed without an inquiry from any one as to where he had been, and what he had done after deserting his sister and Challoner at the Applebys' gate.

All had been preoccupied—even Challoner had let him alone after the first, when he had made an effort or two, failed, and desisted; the truth being that with enough on his mind already—with Matilda on the one hand to love but not to woo, and Mary Tufnell on the other to woo but not to love—it was more than he cared for to have the burden of Teddy's ill-humour thrust upon his shoulders also; Teddy he must leave to himself. Moreover, he and Matilda understood each other tacitly on the subject. It was nothing to be disturbed about, Challoner assured the devoted sister—nothing which need discompose her; a passing indisposition. It would be better to take no notice—the mood would right itself. And with such comforting assurances she was easily, only too easily induced to fix all her attention on the lips that spoke them.

But thus neglected, bad went on to worse in poor Teddy's breast. Always before, during such occasional freaks of dumb brutishness—for thus alone could they

be classified—he had been tenderly watched and timidly approached : and he had been perfectly aware that little as was the apparent notice taken of his goings and comings, all the house was eagerly awaiting the prodigal's return to a better state of mind. Such a position he had thoroughly enjoyed, poor boy ; to attain it had been his last resource in his present pain and trouble ; but what was he to do when this, his one weapon, failed to take effect ? How retaliate ? How show his spirit ? It was maddening, positively maddening, to think that there was nothing to be done. Literally, down at that stupid old place—and all snowed-in too—there was not a single thing a young fellow could do to make a stir, and show he had some life in him. Overton took no notice of anything ; Challoner merely smiled a smile that drove him wild if ever he started an idea or made a proposition ; while Matilda was too deeply in his black books for anything she could say or do to be right.

At length a notion struck him. He would give them a start and a fright somehow ; a start and a fright, if he could do no more. He would be up and off some fine morning before any one was stirring ; and it mattered not where he went, he would not reappear at the Hall until the people there had had a lesson.

“Run up to town !” exclaimed Matilda, in undoubted discomfiture and most unflattering amazement, when she received the message her brother had left,—it was to the effect that he found he must run up to town for a few days on business, and was not sure how long he might be kept there, and was not to be expected till he turned up,—quite a lively, jaunty, independent young-man-of-the-period's message, in short, which sounded fair enough in Challoner's ears, but which strangely disconcerted its recipient. “Gone to town ! What does he mean ? What in the world——?” and then she checked herself, and looked, with trouble in her look, at Overton. No-

thing like this had happened for many a year before between the three, and two out of the three knew only too well why it had happened now.

"Where do you suppose he is gone?" said Matilda apart to her elder brother, as soon as she could find him alone; "where do you think he is gone? I cannot imagine; he has no one now, — we have managed to break with them all. I don't believe he has a single address."

"All the better; he will come home all the sooner. I don't really think we need be alarmed," replied he. "I suspect it is a mere piece of temper. It has been coming on for several days, but I thought it best to take no notice. I thought Challoner's being here would keep him straight—I mean, would keep him from openly showing anything amiss. Yet I warned you, Matilda."

"I know—I know. But what could I do?" said Matilda, looking gloomily out. "It is so difficult to manage sometimes, I——"

"To be sure. I don't blame you, my dear girl," said Overton, kindly. "You have often a hard time of it, and no one knows as well as I do how brave you are, and how patient. Cheer up," as her eyes filled beneath his sympathy — "cheer up; don't distress yourself; don't be anxious——"

"——I am; I cannot help it. I have such fears. Overton, if anything happens to him——"

"Nothing will happen to him; we shall have him back here all right and tight by to-morrow at latest; by to-night most likely. You must—ahem—pay him a little attention when he comes; make much of him; and leave Challoner to——"

"But where will he go in town?" She was not willing to talk of Challoner at the moment. "Where will he go? And what will he do?"

"Hang about till he gets the next train back."



And this was precisely what Teddy would have done, had not chance, for good or ill, put a sudden recollection into his head. As Matilda said, he had now no associates: they had weaned him from all his former comrades, and that so effectually, that he had now neither the means nor the desire to reopen any old intimacies. He had not been good, and he had not been happy in his boyhood; he had been both—under supervision—since; and the poor fellow was dimly conscious that it was so—and to do him justice, the idea of actually of his own free-will returning to the mire from which he had been drawn, never entered his head. He merely wished to pretend that he had done so.

But now, what should he do with himself? How pass the dreary day? As Matilda had divined, her poor simpleton was sadly at a loss; and all the gilt was taken off his ginger-bread, all the glitter and dash faded away from his glorious emancipation, when he found himself in a London terminus, with nothing to do, nowhere to go, and no one to speak to.

Of a sudden he recollected Whewell—Whewell whom he had disliked and despised; but who, for want of a better, might serve his purpose in this emergency, who at least would receive him without any troublesome questions or awkward suggestions, and with whom he could pass half an hour—half one of the long dreadful appalling hours before him.

With renewed spirits he jumped into a hansom, and gave the direction—which had stuck by him for some reason or other—and which he now produced and described with a minuteness that was not to be cut short by any knowledge on the part of the driver. “Yoicks!” cried he to himself, “I’m going it!”

Whewell was in, and it would have been hard to say whether he was more pleased to bestow a welcome or his guest to receive one. Probably in his whole life no such

enthusiasm of greeting had ever been bestowed on poor Teddy before—it must be owned he was generally looked upon in the light of Lady Matilda's adjunct; and the response such warmth evoked, and the change it wrought in the feelings he had formerly entertained towards the gay barrister, were such as might have been anticipated under the circumstances.

"Thought I'd look you up," he began, cheerily. "Only here for the day. May I bring up my bag, as I am on my way somewhere else, and did not care to leave it at the station?—" (Whewell flew down-stairs himself, and with his own hand carried up the bag ere the speaker had proceeded farther.) "And so I am awfully glad to find you in," continued Teddy, looking round him.

"I am sure you cannot be more happy than I. It is the greatest piece of luck your catching me in, too. I am up to my ears; but never mind—tell me about yourselves. How are you all? How do you get on in this atrocious weather? Lady Matilda, is she well? Is she—ah—in town?"

"Oh dear, no! she hates town like poison; women do," said Teddy, who knew no better. "No; she is at home, and snowed-up there. The most tremendous fall of snow we have had for years. Awfully hard lines, isn't it? Just coming on the top of the frost, you know. Everyone said we were to have weeks of frost, and the ice was splendid; you never saw such ice——"

"——Ah! you are a skater, I suppose? I never have the time for anything of that sort—at least, of course, I could make time, supposing——." He paused. What he meant was, "Supposing you were to invite me to skate at Overton Hall."

But his visitor, too full of his own affairs to heed either the statement or its amendment, proceeded volubly—

"Oh, you should have been with us! We had the best

fun out. We had telegraphed Challoner down, and he said he had never seen ice like it."

"You had Challoner down?" repeated his host in some surprise. "I thought he was to have been married before now. Is that not come off yet?"

"I said Challoner," explained Teddy, with the idea that the name had not been caught. "Challoner, you know,—the fellow who smashed his wrist when he was down with us for the pheasants. You were there too."

"Of course; yes. We went down together to the Hanwells, and then he had to lie up at your house; but he is all right by this time, I suppose?"

"Right? Oh yes, he's right enough," replied Teddy, with less warmth, as recent grievances began to reassert their pre-eminence in his mind. "There never was anything much wrong with him, I should say," continued he vindictively.

"And what about his marriage, then?" inquired Whewell, carelessly. The carelessness was not assumed—he really suspected nothing.

Teddy, however, looked round with an expression of guileless innocence which was by no means badly done, and which meant this: "If you think to catch me tripping, and get out of me anything about Challoner and Matilda, you're in the wrong box, Mr Whewell. I ain't going to peach, although they have been behaving shabbily to me." All he said, however, was, "His marriage?" in an interrogatory tone that greatly pleased his own ear.

"Why, of course, his marriage. You had forgotten about it, eh? Oh, he will be a Benedick directly."

"Indeed?"

"Come, you know what I mean; tell me the last of it," said Whewell, still unsuspecting; "you must have heard——"

"But indeed I haven't."

"Not, really?"

"No," replied Teddy, pursing up his lips; "no—not a word." ("Well, now, Matilda can't say I didn't tell one good round one for her, at any rate," thought he.)

But Whewell's black eyes grew suddenly round and bright. "Did you not know he was engaged to be married?" said he, quickly.

"N—no; can't say I did. Ah—to whom, may I ask?" ("Rather neatly put, I take it," internally commented the complacent brother once more.)

"To a very nice girl, I believe, a banker's daughter with a lot of money. Let me see, the affair must have been concluded shortly before that time he and I were with you. I heard all about it the other day, and fancied the marriage was to have come off by now. A young Hale, a Clinkton fellow who knows the family well, told me all about it. Trufit, or Truman, or some such name it was. Odd that you shouldn't have known; Hale spoke as if everybody knew."

Not a word in reply.

"And he was with you three weeks or more, wasn't he? In fact, until a very short time ago. And he never mentioned it, not to *any* of you?"

Teddy shook his head: he could not speak. Poor fellow! the diplomatic smile and unconscious air had fallen away to nothing by this time, and now all that remained of it was a pair of starting eyeballs and a jaw that fell every moment lower.

"I—ah—'pon my word, I don't know what you are talking about," at length he found voice to murmur.

"It is news to you, I see. I must say it is rather strange that it should be so. You were so thick with Challoner, what on earth should possess him to keep this from you? What reason had he for keeping it dark at all?" ("There is something up here," said Whewell suddenly to himself; "I have hit the nail somehow. Friend Teddy looks quite aghast. Can it be that Challoner, that

great loutish fellow—but no, Lady Matilda took no sort of notice of Challoner, she ignored him; stop though, let me think,” and with disagreeable clearness came back the last look he had had of the Overton drawing-room, and of a smile which had passed between the *quondam* invalid and his hostess, a perfectly innocuous smile, but one all the same which had caused the departing guest a twinge at the moment, though he had rid himself of the sensation afterwards.) “Challoner has been engaged to be married ever since September,” he stated, calmly enough, but his pulse beat a little faster than usual as he marked the effect the words produced.

“Well!”

For the space of one full minute this was all.

“Well!”

Whewell waited in silence.

“Good heavens! I—I—do you know what he has been doing?—do you know that he has been paying attention to my sister?” burst forth the young man at last. “Good heavens!” unable to be prudent,—“to *my sister*! To *Matilda*! To—to——”

“Pardon me, my dear fellow, think what you are saying; there must be some mistake,” corrected his companion, in the soothing tone in which one speaks to a frantic child; but Whewell’s own blood was now coursing quickly through his veins: “don’t let yourself be carried away by—I mean, don’t run away on the wrong horse, you know. Lady Matilda would hardly thank you for bringing her name into such a discussion; it is quite impossible that there can be any cause for connecting her name with Challoner’s;—that Challoner could have ever thought, have ever given any—in short, you are labouring under a delusion; you have taken hold of some false idea——”

“False idea be hanged!” exclaimed Teddy, passionately; “I don’t know anything about ideas; I never

have ideas: this is *the truth*. I could tell you——.” But here he suddenly drew the rein, and checked the revelation on his lips. “Of course it is nothing to her,” he said, in an altered tone. “Of course Lady Matilda,” with a little air of state—“Lady Matilda does not concern herself as to—to—but we have to take care of her—that’s to say—*confound the fellow!* I—I—I——”

“I had no knowledge of this, of course,” said Whewell, busying himself with some papers on the floor. “Indeed when I first heard of Challoner’s engagement, which I did immediately on leaving Endhill, I concluded that this was at the bottom of his—let me speak plainly—his indifference to the attractions of Overton, and his desire to get away from it as quickly as possible. You must remember that he was always pressing the doctor—your doctor, the one you got for him—to say how soon he could go, and——”

“Oh, he did not want to go at all.”

“You forget, no doubt, your early experience in a later,” proceeded the barrister, who with his natural acuteness divined the case exactly. “When I saw Challoner, he was fretting to the verge of rudeness at having to remain, and——”

“And he was with us for nearly a month afterwards.”

“Indeed?”

“Ay, indeed; he was: he—well?”

“I was not going to say anything.”

“Why did you not tell us about this before?”

“I never thought of telling you; I supposed that, of course, you knew. I took it for granted—he was Hanwell’s friend: Hanwell seemed to know him well; and when I heard the news, I said to myself, What a duffer he must have thought me not to have congratulated him!”

“He never told a soul,” said Teddy, breathing hard; “he never said a single word about it to any one. And here he has been down with us again—I say, whereabouts

does this girl, this banker's daughter, live? At Clinkton?"

"At Clinkton? Yes. You know so much? Yes, of course; for his own people come from that neighbourhood, and his sister, Lady Fairleigh, made the match. Now I think of it—at Clinkton, of course; *in* Clinkton, most likely——"

"Pont House, Archway Terrace?" cried Teddy, eagerly.

"Ah, I can't give you the address——"

"——And you don't know the name?"

"It begins with a T, I feel sure. But, see here—you remember Hale? Deuced pleasant fellow, with a beard. He used to be a chum of yours, he told me. He lives at Clinkton, I can tell you where, for I have had some correspondence with him lately,—you go down, see him, and he will tell you everything."

"Go down? Go to Clinkton? I—I don't know about that."

"Oh, it's easy enough—easy enough for a young fellow like you, with nothing to do," said Whewell, rummaging in his desk for the address. "It will be nothing but a pleasant trip. And you are not a slave like me, tied by the leg. Let me see, you could be at Clinkton this evening,—you are not due anywhere in particular to-night?"

"N—no."

"Well, you can get there easily; I'll look out your train——"

"Stop! I don't know," murmured poor Teddy, trembling all over; "I really don't know," shifting one leg over the other, the very picture of bewilderment and irresolution.

"If Challoner has been playing fast and loose with your sister," said Whewell, suppressing a desire to seize his companion's shoulder, and start him by main force on

the distasteful expedition—"if he has had the cursed impudence—I—I never heard anything to equal it," he broke off with a half-suppressed oath.

"Not that she cares, you understand," affirmed poor Matilda's champion with feeble valour. "Of course it is nothing to her——"

"——Oh, of course, of course,——"

"——But it is the cheek of the thing."

"Ay, it is the cheek of the thing. The presuming hypocritical scoundrel," cried Whewell, but still ever on the watch to see how far he durst go, "to take in Lord Overton, and you, and—your sister." The last word seemed to choke him, but he cleared his throat and proceeded—"And so cleverly as it was done, too. I had no idea—why, he took no notice of—of any one when I was there. I thought——"

"Well, hang it all! I don't know what you call 'taking no notice'; he has never done anything *but* 'take notice' to my mind," rejoined the innocent brother. "It is Matilda with him all day long; he hangs about her from morning till night, and she"—again recollecting—"she can't well shake him off, you know; it is not easy to shake off a fellow of that sort."

"And he is down there now?"

"Down there now. I left him there."

"And he came to you—did he come from Clinkton?"

"Came straight from Clinkton."

"Now look here," said Whewell, laying a hand—a strong insistant hand—upon the young man's shoulder—"look here. You will take this afternoon train to Clinkton; I will look it out for you; I have a railway-guide here. You can sleep at the Station Hotel, and call on the Hales first thing to-morrow. Hale will be delighted to see you. Make out you were passing and looked in, and get out of him all about the engagement. *It may* be off. If it is off, find out when. Mind you find out when;



for it certainly was *not* off when Challoner went first to Overton. I should say, judging from appearances, that it is still on—on at this moment, and——”

“——And what am I to say at home?”

“Are they expecting you at home?”

“Of course—that is to say, I must send word somehow.”

“Send a telegram. Here,” said the prompt barrister—“here is a form; write there,” pointing with his finger. “No need to mention where you are going, but say you are off to see a friend. You can get back either by to-morrow night or Thursday morning,—probably Thursday morning. If Hale is not at home when you first call, go again; don’t leave without seeing him, if you mean to do any good. I suppose you really wish to find out the truth?”

“Yes,” said Teddy, firmly, “I do.”

“And you are game to go?”

“Ye—es,” less assured. “Yes; game to go.”

“All right; I’ll see you off myself. Give you some lunch first, and then start you. Of course you will be careful to let out nothing, while you learn everything. You can trust yourself to that? Very well. There; that’s Hale’s address for you. You have your pocket-book? That’s the place; put it in there; you’re safe to catch him somehow, or at any rate some of them. He has sisters; go in to see them, if he is out; it does not matter whom you see or speak to, only find out the truth from *some one*. You’ll do that?”

Teddy nodded. “I’ll do that,” he said, with a frown, which was on the whole the most satisfactory omen of success he had yet shown.

(“Not quite such a fool as he looks,” reflected Whewell. “I should say he’ll do the job now, and perhaps as well as a better man would.”) “Well, you understand all you have to do, then,” he said aloud, “and—ah—I shall

see you on Thursday. I shall run down to Hanwell's for the night. I can easily offer myself for the night, and will meet you there."

"What," said Teddy, stupidly, "what are you coming for?"

"I should like to hear the end of this, as a matter of curiosity—purely as a matter of curiosity," replied Whewell, smiling.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### ASHES.

"Ah, dream too bright to last!  
Ah, starry hope that didst arise  
But to be overcast!"

—E. A. POE.

On first breaking loose from the loathed bonds at Clinkton, and returning to feed upon the fair and forbidden fruit at Overton, Challoner had experienced a vehement and reckless sense of relief: a sort of devilry of joy had possessed him which had bidden defiance to every consideration but that of present bliss, and by this, every nobler feeling of shame or pain had been for the time stifled. But scarce had he eaten of the fruit than the flavour of the ashes began to be felt. It was sweet in the mouth but bitter to the stomach; and every enchanting moment had had to be paid for by hours of subsequent torture.

A soft word, a tender blush, on the part of Matilda, would make his heart beat and his eye kindle; and afterwards, in the solemn conscience-speaking hours of the night, he would recall it with pangs unutterable. Once she asked him to render her a trifling service—it was but

a little thing, he was sure to like to do it—and she saw, she was sure she saw, his great nether lip tremble as he turned away from her thanks. How could she but pity, with that pity which is love itself, not akin to it only? His slightest wish became law to her. He could not ask a thing she would not do. Oh, how long, how long could this go on?

One night—it was on the Wednesday following Teddy's abrupt departure—Challoner was more than usually restless and wakeful. He was up, and pacing his room during the short hours. The idea of bed was hateful, that of sleep impossible. He must be thinking, planning, hoping, wondering, fighting down his misery and perplexity, battling with the mesh which he had himself spun, and which was ever weaving closer and tighter around him.

He had even been more than usually tender and lover-like towards Matilda that day. He had allowed himself to try yet further and further how far her exquisite compliance and sweet submission would go; he had courted every coy glance and sign, and wooed the very fall of her eyelids and blushes on her cheek, testing to its utmost the power which was so valueless, and which none but a madman would have dared to tamper with.

By every sign that love could discover, he had but to ask and this beautiful woman, who was all that heart of man could desire, and beyond what hope of man could ever have pictured, was his own. Never had monarch had so fair a kingdom set before him. Never had one been more absolutely prevented entering into its possession.

Now, easy as it is to condemn the criminal weakness which had led the infatuated lover into this strait, which of us, when once in, would have been able to say for certain in what manner, or by what means, he could fairly get out of it? To such a pass had Challoner come,

that to deal honestly with either of the two women he had been duping was to cover both with dishonour. And what could he do? Could he at this hour, without cause or provocation, suddenly trumpet aloud the truth, the whole naked dreadful truth? Could he suddenly stand forth and say, "I am a traitor," and there let the matter rest? Supposing the announcement made, it would be awkward with nothing to follow. Was he to suggest marriage or renunciation? Was he to ask Mary Tufnell to take him, or to leave him? With Matilda, of course, all would be over for ever—of course, of course, she would not pardon him? Certainly not. She would have nothing more to say to him? Undoubtedly, nothing more. They would never meet again? Never.

All the time he knew he was hoping and hoping. It would be bad enough, whichever way it ended, once the truth were out, but—he could bear a good deal. He would have to stand a curse or two,—he could do that. He would have to keep out of Clinkton in future,—he could put up with that. He would have to learn to forget poor Mary's name and the wrong he had done her, and the cruelty he had inflicted upon her,—that would be more difficult, but he would try, yes, he would try ever so much, if only Matilda—and this was the end and goal of every inward contest,—“if only Matilda”—if only he could rely upon Matilda; but—he could not.

The sweat stood upon his throbbing brow as he leaned it on his hands, and saw in his mind's eye the day of doom approach. Self-pity was so strong within him that the water in his eyes forced itself from beneath their burning lids, and wetted the cheek on either side, and again his coarse lip shook and his chest heaved. Turn where he would, no light appeared anywhere in the labyrinth of his thoughts; round and round he wandered, lost, among them,—up and down he trod the same stony track which led to nowhere.

He had that day received a note from Lady Fairleigh announcing her return to England, and begging his attendance on her at her hotel in London on the following day. She wished to see him, to hear about his marriage, to know what he would choose as her wedding-gift, with more of the kind,—to his mind the writing was like that of the recording angel. Yet he had, as we have said, tempted himself more than ever with Matilda that day. It had seemed as if he could hardly bear to let her out of his sight; his eye had followed her every action and movement, and he had taken note of every little thing she did and said, as a man may take a farewell of earth and sky ere he leaves this world for ever. Many a time thereafter he heard in the whistle of the wind on a cheerless eve the trifling sentences she let fall; many a time he saw her stand before him as she stood that day, and wondered that he had not then and there perjured himself for the one privilege of a kiss. He knew now in the grim night that he had been listening as one who might never hear again, seeing as one who saw for the last time,—and it was this conviction that started the tear, the one tear which no other emotion had induced.

That the end must come sooner or later, he had, indeed, all along known; but with Lady Fairleigh's letter it seemed as though it were already there—as though a Nemesis no longer behind, were upon him.

At length he slept where he sat, leaning across the table, his head resting upon his arms. He slept, and woke almost immediately, shivering and affrighted. Good heavens! what had he dreamed? Matilda! could it have been Matilda? Yes, it was even she, she who had entered by that dim doorway over yonder, and who had seized upon him and would have strangled him with her cobweb handkerchief, holding his throat in the grasp he had once felt upon his arm,—and as he struggled for his life, imploring and beseeching, Mary Tufnell—the other one—

the girl who called him hers,—and whom—shame upon him! he had gone through the farce of embracing as became a betrothed husband, with whom he had performed his part, and hated himself and it alike,—it was she who now flew to his rescue. Yet, oh, terrible! it was Mary he turned from—it was Matilda he turned to. It was the hand that was killing he sought to kiss, it was the deaf ear into which he poured affection, it was the unmoved face he gazed upon. She heard not, pitied not;—with a moan the sleeper shuddered himself awake, and the vision fled. Only a few minutes had elapsed.

Again he slept, and again dreamed of Matilda. Matilda was his wife—his beloved, adored wife; and yet between him and her, the object of his fondest passion, there was ever an invisible, intangible, insurmountable barrier,—something ever kept them apart; he never felt her hand about his neck, her breath upon his brow. He would speak to her, and she would not answer—approach her, and she faded away. Struggling against the grisly prison-bars, he woke again. Another ten minutes had barely gone by.

But this was the last of such awakenings. Out of sheer exhaustion Challoner at length laid his head on his pillow and slept profoundly—so profoundly, indeed, as to be with difficulty aroused long after ten o'clock by the information that Lord Overton and Lady Matilda had been at breakfast some time.

“You are going to town, eh?” said the former, when the delinquent at length appeared; “you are going to town? Best thing you can do. See what a thaw! What a state the roads will be in! There will not be an inch fit to tread on. The country is wretched in a thaw like this.”

Challoner explained that it was not the thaw but Lady Fairleigh's summons which took him to London.

“You will come back, of course?” said Overton, easily.

Now was the time ; now, when brother and sister were alike listening, when both would understand what an apology and an evasion must portend, and when—but the mentor's voice was roughly checked. Bah ! he would not show the white feather yet ; fate had been too kind in the matter after all, for him to play the chicken-hearted coward while yet he held a card in his hand. Come back ? Certainly he would come back, and he answered accordingly.

"By four o'clock. Yes, thanks," he said.

All the throes of the night had been gone through in vain.

"Have you only to see your sister ?"

"That's all."

"Where do you meet her ?"

"Grosvenor Hotel. She is there now. I shall have an hour with her."

"And that will be enough ?"

"Quite enough," said Challoner, with miserable irony.

It was necessary that he should go—absolutely necessary that his superior, managing, ferreting, elder sister should have no notion that there were any dust-corners in his life which she could not poke her nose into ; but an hour of her "Have you done this ?" and "How about that ?" of her sharp sifting queries and straight eyes,—would be, he considered, quite enough.

He walked to the station, and as he went, again and again he cast a glance behind. For once presentiment was right. The last day had come.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

## TEDDY TELLS.

"The dawn is overcast, the morning lours,  
And heavily in clouds brings in the day,  
The great, th' important day."

—ADDISON.

Our readers will bear in mind that Lady Fairleigh's summons to her brother took him to town on the very Thursday morning that Teddy Lessingham returned from his secret mission to Olinkton—the mission which had been undertaken at Whewell's instigation, or rather by his command and beneath his pressure; and now, while the gallant young stranger, who had thus appeared and disappeared as by magic before Bertha Tufnell's admiring eyes, had left behind him an impression that was as agreeable as it was stimulative and curiosity-inspiring, he with very different sensations—indeed, with but one thought and one desire filling his mind—was hurrying southwards with all the speed he could, only anxious to disburden his overcharged bosom of its oppressive and momentous contents.

The two quondam friends passed each other on the way, for the train which bore Challoner up from Overton whistled into the London terminus just as that which bore Teddy down whistled out; but little did either think how near the other was.

Teddy had returned from the north the night before, too late to proceed home then and there, as he would fain have done, for the last stopping train had gone, and it was imperative that he should go by a stopping train, as he was careful to explain to all who would listen; and accordingly, after the twentieth assurance that none of the kind required would leave before morning, he had



made himself snug at a good hotel, had enjoyed an excellent dinner and night's sleep, and had so far indeed bent to circumstances, as to consider that the second morning train down would do well enough for him. The first was really too early; they were not early people at the Hall, and our young friend was invariably the last to appear at the breakfast-table,—so that, ardently as he now burned to get back, to confront the traitor who had ousted him from Matilda's side, and who now in his turn was to be justly served by being himself hurled from that high place, 9.30 was too much: nobody could be up and dressed, and breakfasted, and started by half-past nine o'clock on a winter morning—a dull, foggy, worst kind of winter morning too, warm as an oven and oppressive as a feather-bed.

At eight he had been called, and had decided the point with a promptitude engendered by habits of ease; and another excellent hour's snooze, and the comfort of dressing by daylight instead of by gaslight, had been his reward.

Once on the alert, however, Teddy was brisk enough—so brisk indeed, that, long before it was needful, he was pacing the railway platform from which he was to start, whiling away the time by every means ingenuity could devise; restlessly consulting his watch every few minutes; investigating bookstalls, questioning porters, and getting himself entangled among trucks and luggage as the hour of departure approached.

Refreshed by his trip, his attention diverted by new scenes, new faces, and on the whole new thoughts, he was another man altogether from what he had been during the last few days; and now, literally aglow with information and indignation—but indignation of a kind that was endurable compared with the sullen torments lately undergone, which none had shared, and none had even seemed to see—he almost forgot, in the magnitude of his

embassy, the importance it cast upon himself, and the ignominy upon his rival, that his great piece of news, with all its details and variations, might not be quite so delightful for Matilda to hear as for him to tell.

So rapidly had his own feelings towards Challoner changed, with such a sudden crash had they fallen from the utmost heights of warmth and ardour to the lowest depths of dislike and distrust, that, as was usual with him, the latter, the present state of mind, had entirely swept away all recollection of the former.

Challoner was now odious to him; no name was too bad for such a scoundrel; there was nothing he would not believe of him, no fate he would not prophesy for him.

In epithets, muttered denunciations, and imprecations, his wrath found vent with an ease and satisfaction that only needed an auditor to make it complete; and with his sister for that auditor, the prospect as he drew near the old familiar country-side made him scarce able to tolerate the slightest delay.

Yes, Matilda would listen to him now. He had something to tell her now that would make her give him an audience, whether she would or not.

She would listen and he would unfold all. How amazed she would be! How she would stare when she heard where he had been, and with whom, and for what purpose!

"Yes, I went to the place, and ascertained the facts, and there can be no doubt on the subject," he imagined himself saying. "Whewell said I was the proper person to go, and so I was. Brothers are the people to interfere in affairs of this kind; and Overton is no good—he is not the sort of fellow at all to know what to do. Whewell put me up to it (she thinks a lot of Whewell), and as soon as I saw my way clear, I was off. You need not be afraid: I understood what I was about; I was as sharp

as anything, and managed it all beautifully,—and now, what do you say to me? Am I not," &c., &c., &c., when of course she would caress him and thank him, and he would be her own Teddy once more.

But that Matilda would *mind*? That he was about to stab her to the heart? That he must pause and turn the knife aside, and blunt its edge, and soften its cruel stroke? Poor childish creature! the idea never so much as occurred to him.

With the utmost eagerness he now made his way on foot to the Hall by side paths and short cuts, which greatly curtailed the distance, and with complacency he discovered that it was only a little after half-past two by the large stable clock as he rounded the corner, and almost ran up to the front door. Matilda seldom if ever went out before three even in the short winter days; he was sure to catch her.

A footman was crossing the vestibule as the traveller stepped inside, and stopped short, surprised; but Teddy had forgotten to put any value on the suddenness of his reappearance, and the man's pause and exclamation passed unheeded.

"Lady Matilda within?" He was getting out of his greatcoat as he spoke, and did not catch the reply.

"Eh? Is she in the dining-room? Is luncheon not over yet? Oh, it is over! Don't take it away though, John; I have not had any. Just leave anything there is; I'll be down directly. I want to see Lady Matilda for a minute first; where is Lady Matilda? Is any one with her? Where, did you say,—*where*?"

He fully expected to hear, "With Mr Challoner in the boudoir, or in the billiard-room, or the library,"—certainly "With Mr Challoner" somewhere or other; in which case he had in his own mind arranged to send by John a message to her ladyship—he knew exactly how he should phrase it—to the effect that he had returned by the mid-

day train, and would be obliged if she would see him for a few minutes in private, as he had important information to communicate,—(Challoner, of course, need never know then, nor after, that it was *that* which constituted the information). And so much did the thoughtless brother enjoy the situation, so full was he of the honour and glory of the post he held, that it must be owned the footman's reply assuring him that her ladyship was alone and at liberty—that she had the minute before rung her bedroom bell, announcing herself ready for her afternoon's ride, and that her horse was just coming round from the stable—was in its way quite a disappointment.

"Is she just gone up, did you say?" he inquired a second time.

"Her ladyship went up a quarter of an hour ago, sir. She must be ready by this time, sir. I think I hear the horses coming round now," listening.

"Horses? Oh, bother! Well, I say, tell them to wait. I must see Lady Matilda first."

Horses? That meant that Challoner was also making ready for a gallop over the downs; and no doubt it was *his* horse, his own horse Trumpeter, whom that infernal puppy—

"I shall want Trumpeter myself," he said, sharply.

"Very well, sir; what time, sir?"

"Oh, I don't know: I'll tell you presently. I was afraid that he might be—that some one else might be taking him. What horse is Mr Challoner having, then?"

"Mr Challoner is gone up to town, sir,—gone up for the day, to return by the four o'clock train. Her ladyship is riding alone this afternoon, sir; Charles, I believe, is to attend her."

In another minute Teddy was tapping at his sister's door.

"Oh, you are come back, my dear boy!" cried Matilda,

flying upon him with open arms ; “and come back just in time to go with me to Endhill. I want you so much. Now that is nice of you ! I am just off for Endhill : fly, and tell them to bring round Trumpeter too ; and Charles need not go with us, need he ? Think, Ted, it is a whole week, a week to-day, since I was there ! Robert will inquire after my health, and hope I have not suffered from a cold, or a chill, or the miserable weather, or my exertions during the skating time ; and Lotta will inform me that baby has grown out of all his frocks, and needs new ones, and beg to show me patterns and—— Why, what’s the matter ?”

It had all come back to her companion now,—all the old home-feelings, the love of Matilda, and fear of Matilda, and dependence on Matilda—Matilda as his one necessity in life, his daily bread, his dearest, kindest, most beloved friend and comforter ; and with the sight of her sweet face and the listening to her lightsome prattle, with the old blue riding-habit, and the greeting that had in it no word of reproach,—with the whole there came over poor Teddy’s soft heart such a sense of guilt and dismay as he had never experienced before. All his anticipated triumph shrank and withered into filthy rags.

“What’s the matter, boy ?” said Matilda, pleasantly. “Don’t you want to come ?”

“You see,” stammered poor Teddy—“you see I am just off a journey,—a long journey—two long journeys.”

“How many more ?”

“I don’t know how many more, I am sure. I have been travelling ever since I left here,” his courage rising a little as the dash and spirit of the thing recurred to him. “I have never been out of trains——”

“——Gracious me ! What did you do that for ?”

“I could not help it. It,” cried Teddy, with a gulp—“it is a long way to Clinkton.”

"To Clinkton? Oho! Oh, oh, *oh*, oh! Oh, now I begin to understand! Oh, you sly thing! It is a long way to Clinkton indeed,—a very long way. Pray—if it is not inquisitive to ask—pray what took you to Clinkton?"

"What took me?" said Teddy, gaping at her as if she already must have divined, or ought to have divined, his object. "What?—you may well ask what took me."

"Why, she is not worse, is she? You are very grave. Dear Ted, I meant no harm; but I have heard nothing. I would not jest about it for the world, if she is really worse."

"She! Who?" He had been so full of the one aspect of the case, that he had forgotten there might be any other. "She! Who?" he demanded.

It was now Matilda's turn to stare.

"Oh! you mean Juliet Appleby," said Teddy, with a surprising effort. "Oh, I say!"—in consternation—"I say, Matilda, I forgot poor Juliet altogether! Upon my word, I declare I never once thought of her; and I was on the spot and all! How very provoking! What would they say? And after my offering—but mind you never let out that I was there, and perhaps they may never hear of it. What a stupid I was, to be sure!"

"But," exclaimed his sister, puzzled still more by this—"but if it was not on Juliet's account, what, may I ask, were you doing at Clinkton? What was the attraction there, of all places? Your telegram——"

"——Ay, you got my telegram?"

"The night you left. But it merely said you had gone to a friend, and did not say where. Your friend was at Clinkton, then?"

"He lives there. I spent a couple of hours with him there yesterday."

"A couple of hours!" said Matilda, laughing. "Pardon me, dear, but I cannot help it. A couple of hours! And you travelled all the way from London, five hours'

journey from London," (she knew exactly how long it took), "to see — a friend. Dear, dear, dear! Funny boy," patting him merrily on the shoulder. "What will he do next, I wonder?"

"Well, I wanted to see him," began Teddy.

"And, to be sure, there was no earthly reason why you should not," rejoined his sister; but even he could see that it was with difficulty she restrained the amusement his doings afforded her—"no reason at all; only you will allow—but no matter. Away with you now, you dear simpleton, and tell me all about it some other time! It will wait,—and the horses won't. Away with you!" pushing him gently towards the door; "if that is all you have to tell me, away with you, and make yourself ready as fast as you can! Get you gone, young sir!——"

"But, confound it, you won't let me speak!" protested poor Teddy, already with his face close to the door. "Can't you listen to me for a single moment, instead of talking the whole time yourself? I tell you I *have* something to say——"

"——Say away, then; only be quick about it."

"I heard something at Clinkton."

"What did you hear?"

"It was about—about Challoner."

"About Mr Challoner?" As quick as lightning there was a change in her face. "About Mr Challoner? Well?"

A pause.

"Go on."

Another pause.

"What about him?" demanded Matilda, all attention—close, concentrated, unswerving attention now.

Unfortunate Teddy! that swift interest took away the last remains of any desire to communicate.

"Challoner is engaged to be married," he said in a thick guttural voice, not at all his own. "He is engaged to a Clinkton girl. It is to see her he goes to Clinkton."

"I heard it first from Whewell," continued the narrator, eager to continue, now that he had begun. "I went to Whewell the day I left here. That was Tuesday, you know. I went to call on Whewell. I had no idea of anything; I merely went to make a friendly call, as young fellows do, and I happened to say we had Chalonner with us, and he said something about his marriage; so then I said we had never heard a syllable about his marriage—for you know we had not."

A smothered movement.

"Oh, you may trust me. I took care what I said," proceeded Teddy, comprehending with wonderful sagacity what was meant. "I took precious good care not to let *you* down——"

"—— Never mind that. Go on."

"Well, I could not help showing that we knew nothing of the marriage, because you know we did know nothing, and Whewell seemed to know everything. Chalonner has been engaged since before we ever set eyes upon him,—engaged for three months and more,—and the wedding is to be immediately. Stop! hear me out," as she had raised a pale smiling face for denial—"just you hear me out. I am not going upon Whewell's word—though Whewell is not a bad fellow, and was uncommonly civil to me—but I knew *you* would never believe a thing he said." She nodded to this. "So that was what took me to Clinkton. Whewell told me where Hale lived—that is my friend—and I—I really did not want to see him, you know,—and Whewell thought it would be a good plan."

"He sent you?"

"Sent me? No indeed; I went of my own accord. But it was he who thought of it——, what do you look like that for?" breaking off suddenly.

"Well, I went to Clinkton," continued Teddy, meeting with no reply; "I went the day before yesterday, and



found Hale at home the next morning—that was yesterday morning; and just as I was coming away, and they had told me all about it—this marriage, I mean,—who should I fall in with but the very girl herself—I mean, her sister.”

“Well?”

“Oh, she told me a heap: I had it all over again from her. It was exactly as Whewell had said; her sister had been engaged to Challoner ever since last September. He had met her first at Lady Fairleigh’s—you remember he has often spoken of his sister, Lady Fairleigh,—and they are to be married next month; early next month, the girl said. She was a nice smart-looking girl,” quoth Teddy, who was not so particular as Matilda — “an awfully well-got-up girl, and she jabbered away like anything. She said her other sister was engaged too, and that they were going to have a double wedding. She said she had often heard of us. Jem—that was Challoner—had spoken of us when he was there lately. She called Overton ‘the Earl,’” said Teddy, with a grin. “She did not know I was ‘the Earl’s’ brother though; I kept that dark. I merely put it to her in a casual sort of way, Had she ever heard of Challoner’s friends, the Lessinghams? And I brought in Overton’s name when she seemed not quite sure. As soon as she heard Overton’s name, she said ‘Yes’ at once, and remarked that they had been very kind to him when he was laid up at their house not long ago. I thought it was as well to be perfectly certain that it really was *our* man, our Challoner that everybody meant,” continued Teddy, who, to be sure, had done as well and shown as much sagacity throughout as though he had been the wisest of the wise. “There may be dozens of other Challoners in the world, you know”—which was precisely what Matilda had twice opened her lips to point out,—“but, of course, there could only be one Challoner who knew *us* and was laid

up here lately," proceeded the speaker, "so that settled the matter. And the Hales spoke as if everybody knew about it; and so did the other girl—the sister of the one you know. Her name is Tufnell. Whewell could not quite get hold of it, but he was sure that it began with a T; and so it did. I said it over to myself lots of times on the way home, for fear I should forget it, as Whewell did; and I knew you would never believe a word if I forgot the name. But anyhow, *it's true*. You may believe me or not, but I've got it all for you as clear as crystal, and it was all exactly as Whewell said: the whole time Challoner has been here he has been as good as a married man, and never whispered a syllable about it!"

He paused at length, for there was no more to be said after this.

"Dear! I think he might have told us," said Matilda, taking up her riding-whip.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### MATILDA SHOWS A BRAVE FRONT.

"Vulgar minds refuse, or crouch beneath their load; the brave  
Bear theirs without repining."

—MALLIT.

Such admirable carelessness was beyond our heroine's simple retainer, and it must be confessed that Teddy's mouth fell open as wide as any ploughboy's when the next minute his sister stepped past him in the doorway and tripped lightly out of sight,—and she had run downstairs, got upon her horse, and was away from the door, before he had even time to rub his eyes and find his voice.

"But I was going too!" he said at last.

It was too late; my lady was far down the avenue ere he reached the front door, and there was no recalling her.

"What on earth——of course I was going," said he again. "A ride is just what I want, to get this beastly journey out of my head; and now that Challoner is disposed of, she will be glad enough to take me on again. Well, I'll get some luncheon, for I'm as hungry as a hunter, and I can go along presently; I'll catch her up at Endhill. Challoner's settled, that's one comfort; but Matilda was not half so mad as I thought she would have been. I was afraid just at the first she might have been a little upset, but she is such a jolly girl—— Oh, there is something hot, is there?" to a servant, who came up with the announcement. "In the library? Oh! I'll come. And, I say, tell them to have round Trumpeter by-and-by—in half an hour or so."

Now, how about Matilda? Straight upright she sat in her saddle, her hands grasping the reins with a tension of which she was wholly unaware, a burning spot on each cheek. She was going to Endhill mechanically—going because she had been going before. Before when? Before there was that rushing sound in her ears, that catch in her breath, that cold numbness at her heart. She had been going to Endhill, certainly she had been going to Endhill; and—and—whatever had been going to be must still be.

Nothing had happened,—oh dear, no,—nothing. If— if by any chance Teddy's ridiculous story should be true, —it was most unlikely, most improbable—Teddy never did tell true stories,—but if, if there was the slightest, most distant chance of his having built his absurd charge upon any sort of foundation, why——she would still go to Endhill. There was nothing to keep her from going to Endhill—nothing to deter her from going anywhere, or doing anything,—and she was at her destination ere she

well knew she had started. She had galloped nearly the whole way.

"Who do you think we have got here?" cried Lotta, greeting her mother in the doorway, her voice betraying that the "who" was within earshot. "Mr Whewell,"—looking round,—“Mr Whewell, come and show yourself. Mr Whewell, mamma, has just arrived.” Lady Matilda had rather a strange look on her face. “We did not know he was coming, for we never got his note,” continued Lotta. “I tell him London letters must be posted by half-past five in the afternoon if they are to be delivered here the next morning.” (As if the artful rogue did not know as much, and had not planned his manœuvre so as not to be disconcerted by any unfavourable reply.) “So we shall probably get your note, Mr Whewell, while we are at tea,” continued Mrs Lotta, running on contentedly, for she had been flattered into good humour by the wily barrister, and now that she had all the talking to herself, turned on the tap graciously. “We shall see it come in, and you will remember for another time. It is so fortunate that we are at home, for we are to be away the whole of next week; and indeed, but for this thaw,——” here Matilda lost her.

From the moment Matilda saw Whewell, hope fled. That bare sight of his face—his triumphant overcharged face, ablaze with information, athirst for opportunity—one single impression of it was enough. She believed every word Teddy had spoken, and believing, not a note in her voice faltered, not a flicker of her eyelids nor a change in her colour betrayed her.

(“I am glad I came,” was all she said within her heart. “Glad—glad—*glad* I came.” Now then—) “How d’ye do, Robert? Is that baby, Lotta? Ah, my sweet!” clasping him to her bosom,—did she for a moment hide her face in his?—“ah, my bonnie boy! how well he looks, how fast he grows! Never cries with me, you see, my

dears. So you have come down to inspect your godson, Mr Whewell," turning to him with graver politeness. "That is quite right, quite as it should be. His other godfather has been here too. He only left us this morning."

"Left you!" exclaimed Whewell, involuntarily.

"Yes, left us for London. He and Teddy must have crossed each other by the way. Teddy is just come; did you come down in the same train with him?"

Whewell had; but he had hidden himself. He had not wished to be recognised, since, above all things, if he were ever to make any way with the lady of his affections again, he must remain in the background now. Now that he had set his puppets working, and that the machinery was in full going order, he must keep aloof, a dispassionate innocent spectator, until the storm had blown by.

Challoner was about to be checkmated, and the desire to see and know how the checkmate was given had proved irresistible. To Endhill he must come to insert himself into the Hanwells' confidence, and gather from Robert's deportment and Lotta's slips of the tongue how far the affair had gone, and in what aspect it had been viewed by the family in general; but he had sufficient penetration and knowledge of human nature to be aware that nothing could be more detrimental to his own interests than to seem to be cognisant of Matilda's feelings at this juncture, or to pry openly into what might be her shame and sorrow.

That she had not treated Challoner with indifference had been only too manifest, in spite of all poor Teddy's endeavours to conceal as much; whether she had given him her whole heart or not, was another question. It had been quick work if she had; and he had fancied Lady Matilda was not to be quickly won.

Directly he had begun to press his own suit, he had been conscious of that invisible intangible resistance

which a woman knows so well how to present, and which is so impossible to surmount or cut through. Immediately Whewell had left behind his open friendly tone for tender asides and soft inquiries, he had felt a difference in his reception both in the boudoir and in the drawing-room; and from this he had drawn the not unnatural conclusion that he had been over-hasty, and that a beauty who knew her own value, and who had doubtless been laid siege to over a score of times, was unlikely to be taken by storm. He should have expected this; and he had more than once blamed himself for his precipitancy, and mused over the wily and wary path he should pursue in future—"Slow and sure" must be his motto.

From this it will be seen that the persevering barrister had by no means given up hopes; and strange to say, Challoner's success—for in his own mind Whewell did not doubt that success—instead of daunting, afforded a curious and subtle encouragement.

Challoner, brainless fool that he was, had found the soft spot in proud Matilda's heart; surely what Challoner could do, he could do. Challoner exposed and defeated, the breach was made, the way open for another.

Only let him be careful not to offend Matilda now, only let her imagine him unconscious—for well he knew that on unconsciousness her pride would set the highest value—and he might yet ascend to the throne by her side. And never had she seemed more queen-like or more gracious than she did at the moment when such thoughts and such hopes were animating the breast of Challoner's rival.

All of this is a digression, but we wish our readers to perceive with what intent the busy and hard-worked Londoner had forced a holiday upon himself in order to ascertain by the surest method possible, the precise nature of the case which was now foremost in his consideration.

"Did you come down in the same train with Teddy?" inquired Lady Matilda, easily.

"No doubt I did; but, oddly enough, we never came across each other," replied Whewell. "You say he is just arrived? Then how did we miss meeting, I wonder? I mean at this end; of course at the other side—there was such a crowd,—and I was late—he had probably got into his carriage before I arrived. If I had known he was to be there——"

"Oh, I thought you did know?" She looked him quietly in the face as she spoke.

"Certainly I knew—knew he was coming down some time to-day, but there are a number of trains," explained Whewell, who had provided for this; "he did not tell me yesterday, when he called at my rooms, what particular train he meant to catch. I knew he could not get back from Clinkton last night in time to come straight on here; and indeed I thought it very likely that his friend Hale might induce him to remain longer—that is to say, if Hale were at home. Did he find Hale at home?"

"Yes, but he only saw him—or them, for I think he saw all the family—for a very short time. I don't suppose he ever intended to stay; he very seldom cares to go anywhere, and it was just a whim."

"I know. Yes, I believe it was I who unwittingly put it into his head," said Whewell, who, it will be seen, had carefully thought out all his part before. "I hope you were not disappointed by his non-appearance; but he sent the telegram, and the poor fellow seemed dreadfully at a loss for something to do, and so charmed to escape from being snow-bound down here. But the snow is all gone to-day. I never was more surprised than when I got up this morning; the air as warm as summer, and the streets one mass of black slush from end to end. 'Pon my word, even the country is better,"—he stopped, annoyed at his awkwardness.

"Yes, even the country is better," repeated Lady Matilda, with a perfectly amiable smile, — "even this poor dreary country of ours is better sometimes than your enchanting London; and it is better than Olinkton too, Teddy thinks," stroking the baby's soft little head. ("He is quite good with me, Lotta, I assure you," in parenthesis.) "Is he not a nice little fellow, Mr Whewell? I am only the grandmother, you know, not the mother, so I may put the question. Are you not proud of him, or of your share in him, whichever it is? Mr Challoner's share is a very small one, by the way, judging from all the claim he lays to it. He is a wretched godfather. He never once came over to see baby this last visit, and now he is gone——"

"——But I never knew he was here!" cried Lotta.

"——Gone, did you say?" repeated Whewell, in a breath.

"I—I understood from your brother that he was at the Hall now," continued he, in the most natural voice he could muster; "I was looking forward to meeting him." But Lady Matilda was addressing her daughter.

"Well, my dear Lotta, it was very rude of him, I own; but then, in excuse, I must say that he only ran down to us for a few days, just because Overton had set his heart on having moonlight skating on the home-ponds, and Mr Challoner had never seen night-skating: so when the moon and the ice came together, we got hold of everybody whom we thought would really enjoy it. We knew *you* would not come, and even Robert——"

"Oh, mamma, pray don't ask him. I should be in agonies till I saw Robert safe home again, if he were to go; and of course *I* could not go. Robert would not hear of it."

"Precisely. That was what we all felt," assented Matilda; "it was no sort of use asking you; but for people who skate——"



"I am very fond of skating," began Lotta, "but——"

"——Mr Challoner, for instance, came down from the north on purpose," continued Lady Matilda, in a perfectly distinct voice, and she looked at Whewell as she spoke.

"Indeed? Lucky fellow! What would I have given—but you never thought of asking me; and indeed last week it would have been of no use—I could not have come by any possibility nor for any attraction," emphatically. "But Challoner, has he—is he off for good?"

"He has only gone to town to-day; but he is to meet his sister, Lady Fairleigh, there,—take care, baby, don't get my watch-chain into your eyes,—and they will want to go north together immediately, I should imagine."

"Ah, to Clinkton," said Whewell, significantly.

"To Clinkton, yes. His *fiancée* lives at Clinkton, you know—(baby, baby, you little mischief! sec, Lotta, he has pulled down my hair)."

"What do you mean about his *fiancée*?" demanded Lotta, in blunt amazement. "Is Mr Challoner engaged to be married?"

"Mrs Hanwell had not heard of it, then?" observed Whewell, whom nothing escaped. "Had you heard, Hanwell?" wheeling round his chair as the door opened, for Robert had been out making arrangements for the comfort of his unexpected guest. "Had you heard about Challoner?"

"What about Challoner? No, I have not heard anything about him."

"Not about his marriage?"

"His marriage! No. Is he going to be married? I had no idea of it, nor had any of us."

"My dear Robert, I have just been telling Lotta the reason why he has been so remiss in not coming over here. You see, we have been so shut up, and the roads have been so bad ever since the snow fell, and Mr Challoner only came the day before the snow fell," murmured

Lady Matilda, not very coherently; but coherence was perhaps the last thing to be desired, all things considered.

"Oh, I beg your pardon; you knew about it, then?" inferred her son-in-law very naturally. "He has been with you lately; is he with you still?"

"He comes down again this evening; but I should think he will rejoin his sister either to-morrow or next day."

"And—and you knew of this engagement?" proceeded Robert, with the stolid tread of an elephant on the delicate ground; and he was not ignorant that the ground was delicate either, for as he spoke he breathed slightly, drew up his brows, and looked round at each in turn before he stole a glance at Lady Matilda. He had had his own ideas about Lady Matilda,—ideas which were too distasteful to be imparted even to his wife, but which had been forced upon his dull perceptions in spite of himself, and of every argument he could think of on the other side. He had felt that there was something, although he could scarcely have defined what—but that there was something, *something* going on at Overton Hall; and that, whatever that something was, Challoner was at the bottom of it.

"Oh, it is an old story, as stories go," said Whewell, with an interposition for which he hoped Matilda would be grateful,—“a three months' old story, at any rate,” getting up and ostensibly addressing his host, but in reality talking at and for one person only. “Three months is an age in these rapid times. I knew all about it long ago, and thought that of course you did too.”

“No, indeed.”

“Not when you had him down here in November—I mean last month? It seems so long since I was here, I can hardly think it was only last month. Did he not tell you then?”

"No."

"Odd that he said nothing. But some men are extraordinarily shy about these matters, and Challoner is just that sort of reserved fellow. It was not from himself that I heard it—it came to me in quite a roundabout way; and then, when I recollected that the subject had not been mentioned openly among you, I concluded that he had not cared to be talked about. But I thought that of course you knew. The engagement was young then."

"Perhaps he was not engaged then." The bright thought was Lotta's.

"Oh, he was; he certainly was," said Whewell, sharply. "Everybody knew it. And no doubt," markedly and exclusively now addressing Matilda—"no doubt your brother heard the thing mentioned at Clinkton yesterday. He did? Yes, I was sure he would. He went to the Hales', and the Hales are the Tufnells' particular friends. Tufnell is the name, I remember now. I could not recollect it when your brother asked me: I could only give him the fact, not the details."

"Pray spare them to us also," cried the lady, with a yawn. "Pray, Mr Whewell, if you have any compassion on us poor country-folks, who never hear a thing, and never see a human being, tell us the news, the *on dits*, the scandal of the town, and don't, *don't* be prosy. It is delightful of you to have catered for us this—this charming piece of gossip, and we only beg you not to spoil it by too much skill and pains. It would be a pity——"

"But I really want to know," broke in Lotta, who had scarcely yet recovered from her astonishment. "Do, mamma, just let Mr Whewell tell us the rest."

"The rest, my child? What does 'the rest' consist of? What can remain? Is it not enough when Mr Whewell can furnish even the name?" said Matilda, with a bitter-

ness she struggled in vain totally to conceal: "he has been so good as to leave nothing to our imagination; in another minute you will be in possession of a complete list of the wedding guests——"

"——I could get it, I believe," said Whewell, laughing. "The wedding is to take place immediately, and if Mrs Hanwell has any curiosity——"

"I want to know who and what she is," said Lotta, plainly. .

"She is a banker's daughter—a banker's very pretty daughter, I believe," replied her informant, with a malicious enjoyment in the saying it,—“quite young, barely twenty, rich, and—and all the rest of it. A lucky match for Challoner, no doubt, and one that is not to be made every day."

"I am going up-stairs to have a private confab with nurse," announced Lady Matilda almost directly after this. "Stay where you are, Lotta; you are not to come, —don't you understand? Nurse and I can arrange all about the new cloak and hood without you; the new winter cloak and hood I promised, you know. It is time the little master had it, and it is to be a dead secret from everybody else until it appears. So just stop where you are, my dear; I will come down when I am ready," peeping in at the door after she had left the room.

That coming down proved to be harder than anything she had yet had to do. Animation was beginning to return, she was coming to herself as out of a dull deadly stupor, when the time came for again facing the drawing-room; and the party there had not separated, as she had half hoped they might have done: they were still herding together, three against one, as she felt them to be; and the poor one, inwardly quivering in every fibre, had again to assume unconsciousness and light-heartedness, and endeavour to cheat, elude, and throw off the scent,—well aware that with one, at least, of those present no endea-

your would avail. That Whewell knew all, she was now certain.

But she played her part bravely and well that dismal December day. Without flinching for a moment, or for a moment relinquishing that firm hold on herself which it was all in all with her now to maintain, Lady Matilda turned to one and another, never pausing, never trusting herself even to consider what must next come to pass—how she should enact the same again in the Overton drawing-room with another three around her—how to meet, and greet, and part with Challoner for ever.

This would require every power she possessed ; but she had none as yet to spare for the future, until the future should make demands for its own necessity.

At length escape came, and gaily waving her hand, and smiling to the last, Matilda rode off rapidly on the road towards the sea. Teddy had not appeared—he had been detained—and she was thus far spared to solitude and misery.

“Are you going by the downs, my lady?” It was the groom who had ridden up—respectful suggestive remonstrance audible in the question.

“Yes.” He had never heard my lady speak so haughtily in his life. She motioned him back like an empress, —but he would try again.

“The ground will be very soft, my lady ; the heavy thaw——”

He fell back ; he had been made to fall back by a gesture which admitted of no further parley,—where his mistress led, it was for him to follow, and his business began and ended there. So Charles understood, and whatever he might think, he durst no more molest. What did Matilda care though the ground were soft and the thaw heavy ? The ground and the thaw were nothing to her. Soft ? Heavy ? She wondered what the words meant. Her *heart* was heavy—heavy like a stone, and as

hard,—no softness about *it*,—and she had lingered so long at Endhill, had been so resolute in her bravado there, that to go straight home now, was to meet and confront Challoner within the hour, and without hope of escape. No, she could not do that yet, could not face that traitor yet.

He would hear where she had gone, would inquire instantly, and be told; and should she take the direct road to the Hall, she would find him in all probability coming to meet her, or lying in wait at the front door ready to propose a garden stroll or a musical hour. Oh, what should she say? What could she say? How answer, how look, and not betray her secret? It was but yesterday he had trembled before her; it was her turn to tremble now.

She must not meet him alone; that was the one thing clear in the tumult of her thoughts: and to achieve this she must be out late, take the roundabout route by the downs, only get in after Overton and Teddy were sure also to have returned, then hurry to her room, and a word to each brother before the party assembled for dinner would be all that was needed.

They would congratulate the happy man; Teddy would inform him of his expedition; Challoner would understand, without occasion for anything being said that could cause a breath of unpleasantness,—oh, it would be all smiles and amiability,—and the next day he would depart, and be to them as though he had never been.

The wild western wind blew about the scattered curls which Lotta's baby had dishevelled, but no wind could cool the burn on Matilda's scalding brow. The dark sea rolled in thunder along the cliffs below, but she only heard that din in her ears, that rushing in her veins. The gulls flew and shrieked overhead; she looked, and there was a thick blinding mist before her eyes.

Here and there she came to a point on the cliff where

the weight of water, from the extent and rapidity of the thaw, had forced down the soft sandstone, and the most serious of these landslips was scarcely passed, when the groom, unable longer to keep silence, again rode up, at the risk of a reprimand, to warn his mistress of the danger of approaching near to an edge so treacherous.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth, she had barely turned her head to listen, when a loud shout from in front rang through the gloom, so startling in its vehemence and nearness, that both horses swerved violently aside, and Matilda, who had but a negligent seat at the moment, was thrown with force to the ground.

The next instant the figure of a man appeared running to the spot.

"Good God! what have I done?" exclaimed a voice.

It was Challoner's.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### OFF HIS GUARD AT LAST.

"A word unspoken is like the sword in the scabbard, thine; if vented, thy sword is in another's hand."—QUARLES.

Challoner, as Matilda had divined he would, had started to meet her on her return from Endhill.

Tolerably well content with a visit to town which had produced no results either good or evil—for he had seen nothing of his sister, and had obtained no tidings of her beyond ascertaining that her rooms had been engaged at the hotel, but that nothing further had been heard, and no orders received,—content so far, and right willing to be left in the dark for as long as Lady Fairleigh chose, her brother had hurried back to the one place on earth for him that day, and arriving to find all the party out, he had

acted precisely as a lover under happier auspices should have done.

A mile and a half of the highroad having, however, brought no Lady Matilda into view, and the gloom of the winter afternoon deepening every minute, Challoner had hesitated about proceeding, for it had seemed unlikely that the riders should not have been met by that time, unless they had followed some other route. Could they be returning by the downs?

The suggestion had hardly arisen in his mind ere it had been confirmed by his falling in with some of the Endhill farm-servants who had come clattering along at a good pace in an empty cart, and who had readily shouted out that they had seen the horses take the turning towards the sea.

That was enough; he had instantly cut across a field, and a few minutes more had brought him to the well-known path over the downs which he and Matilda had so often traversed.

She certainly could not have passed, if what the labourers had stated were correct, and he had been justly confident of intercepting her, perhaps of persuading her to send on her horse with the groom, and walk the rest of the way home—a short two miles,—it would be a pleasant change; he had thought she would not refuse.

But waiting where he could command the best view of the path, Challoner had been struck, as Lady Matilda's attendant had been, by the numerous landslips along the coast; and one crack in particular, more extensive than the rest, and plainly indicating that the loosened soil would fall ere long, had fixed his attention, and distracted it even from Matilda for a few minutes. He had walked forward to the brink of the cliff in order to discover whether or no any had actually given way; in the inquiry he had become engrossed for the moment; and the ap-



proaching horses making no sound with their hoofs on the soft moist sod, he had neither heard nor seen them till they were too near for him to do more than raise a cry of warning.

The danger was evident; two heavy animals going at a round pace over the already insecure spot would certainly imperil themselves and their riders, and one of the two bore Matilda! His shout was almost a scream, for though himself wellnigh undistinguishable from the surrounding scrub and brushwood in the dusky light, he had instantly recognised her, her outline showing plainly against a lurid wintry sunset.

She now lay motionless and unconscious before him.

"Matilda!" cried Challoner, raising her in his arms—"Matilda! Oh, fool that I was! I have killed her by my own act. No, she is breathing yet; she is but stunned by the fall. There is no stone she can have hit her head against," looking round. "There is nothing; and the hat may have been a protection, though it is off now. But who can tell how and where the hurt may be, especially if—oh, if she would but open her eyes! This is dreadful. I have nothing—and there is nowhere——"

"There is the coast-guard'sman's house up yonder, sir," said the groom, who had dismounted in order to recover his lady's horse, and who now came up on foot, holding the reins of both. "Is my lady very bad, sir? The ground is so soft——"

"See for yourself," sharply. "Where is the house you spoke of?"

"Just by here, sir. We passed it not half a minute ago. Shall I go on and get some one, sir?"

"Go on, and say I am bringing your mistress there. Look sharp. You will have to go for the doctor next thing."

He raised his helpless burden in his arms. The house was even nearer than the man had thought, and they were there immediately.

"Brandy!" cried Challoner, laying Matilda on the little couch of the room into which he was ushered. "Brandy! Quick! A good dose——"

"——Oh, sir," remonstrated the female, who appeared to be host and hostess in one, but who was all helpless amazement and consternation,—"oh, sir, my husband is the coast-guardsmen, sir——"

"——Never mind what he is. Do, for heaven's sake——"

"——Brandy, sir, we never have," reproachfully.

"What *do* you have? Anything—only be quick——"

At length he got what he little expected, a spoonful of sal-volatile, with many explanations as to the medical man's orders about the same, which, we need hardly say, were spoken to deaf ears.

"Shall your servant fetch the doctor now, sir, he wishes to know?" were the first words conveying any impression to the mind of the distracted Challoner.

"Doctor? Fetch the doctor? Do you mean to say he has not gone yet?" he began, savagely,—but on a sudden he stopped short. Something had happened.

"I believe she is coming round," murmured the speaker to himself. "Certainly that was a sigh. And there, she sighs again." "Matilda," in a whisper—"Matilda." Then raising himself and turning round, "Send off the groom at once. Tell him to fetch the doctor, and also a carriage from the Hall. Do you understand? He is first to get the doctor, and then the carriage. Tell him to be off at once. And, I say, just shut the door, will you?"

"Is the lady better, sir?"

"Better? Yes. She must be quiet now, please," impatiently.

"Is there nothing I can do, sir?"

"Nothing—nothing—nothing, thank you. She will be all right presently. Kindly leave us now. I will fetch

you if——” The words died away. The sufferer had unclosed her eyes, but neither she nor Challoner noticed that the door softly closed, and that they were alone; a thousand prying eyes would scarce have been heeded at that moment.

“Matilda,” whispered he—he was still kneeling by her side, enfolding her in his arms,—“Matilda, do you know me, my darling? Oh, my darling, look, look again! See, it is I. And I thought I had killed you—I did indeed. Are you hurt, dearest? Are you in pain?” trembling for her answer. “What? I can’t hear. Just whisper. See, draw a breath. Tell me, does that hurt? You shake your head. Oh, thank God!—what! not anywhere—not *anywhere*? Heaven be thanked! I can scarce believe it. I thought those dear eyes might never——” he could not finish.

“Oh, my love!—my own love,” he burst forth again, “to think that I, I who would lay down my life for your dear sake—that I should have been the one to do so cruel a thing! How I hate myself! But you, you will not hate me, will you, darling? Nay, don’t move. I *must* have you, must hold you thus, else I shall think, shall feel as if—stay, dearest,” passionately; “see, you are in my arms. It is I,” his lips pressed her cheek.

“*This* is I,” he breathed in her ear.

A faint sob, a gasping shivering sigh escaped beneath the touch.

“Good heavens, you *are* hurt!” exclaimed Challoner again alarmed. “Something has struck you—you are concealing it from me! Oh, where? Tell me how and what you feel, and—oh, my dearest, tell me——”

Again that convulsive shudder.

“Is this position painful?” inquired he. “Can I ease it in any way? Lean on me, put your arms round my neck—what? Oh, I have been too bold. I know it. I am beginning to recollect now, but—but—I will not,

I cannot care: I will think only of you, not of myself. What can I do for you now? Are you deceiving me? If I only knew that——" anxiety again arising.

"No."

She had spoken at last.

"It is you, not I," said poor Matilda, struggling for sense and coherency. "You are the one who——" she fell back again upon her pillow.

It was obvious, however, that she had not relapsed into unconsciousness, and Challoner, whose fears were allayed anew, contented himself with fond murmurs and soothing assurances, while he again and again assured the passive listener of his presence and of his love. It seemed as though his tongue, thus loosened and set free at last, could not stint itself, could never cease to exclaim and endear; and as the motionless form of Matilda, still confused and bewildered, yielded involuntarily to his embrace, his passion found vent unchecked for some minutes, and past and future were swallowed up in the too exquisite present.

Then all at once he felt a movement different from any the sufferer had yet made. "Let me get up," she said, faintly. "Let me sit up. I—I want to speak."

"You are hardly fit to speak yet, dearest," replied Challoner, his deep tones full of tenderness. "What! You really wish to change your position? Gently, then; let me support you——"

"No, don't support me, Mr Challoner," said Matilda, quietly; "I would rather—you—did not."

He withdrew his arm, but remained kneeling before her.

"Do you not understand?" he said.

"I understand; yes. But we ought to understand each other, I think. Will you please get up?"

"Dear," said Challoner, laying his hand on hers—"dear, you speak strangely; you do not know what you are saying——"

—A smile woke up upon her face—a smile so woful, so wintry, that it chilled the very blood in his veins, for it seemed to him the smile of one distraught; and his fears at once led him to attribute any wandering of the mind to the recent fall, whose ill effects had not yet been fully ascertained.

“You are—are——” he stammered in new agitation.

“I am not mad,” replied Matilda; “I am not mad. I——” putting her hand to her head, as one awakening to the sharp reaction which follows on the heels of a narcotic—“would you mind repeating once again what you said just now?”

“What I said just now?”

“About me.”

“About you, my dearest?”

“Yes, that’s it; about me, your ‘dearest.’ Well?”

“Lie down again, sweet one,” said Challoner, soothingly; “lie down here, as you were before. Nay, don’t put me away. I will say it all—anything you wish, only——” again attempting to draw her towards him.

“You will?” cried Matilda, suddenly springing up and thrusting him back with a look of horror. “You will? And you would dare? What?” panting out each word as she had strength for it, “Dare to—touch me? to insult me? to perjure—yourself? You would? Have you—no shame? no pity? no—no—oh, God forgive you, Mr Challoner, for I never can.” She covered her face with her hands, and he heard her sobbing behind them.

It may seem incredible, but until that moment it had never crossed Challoner’s mind that anything could have occurred since he had left Overton in the morning, when Matilda had followed him to the door, and waved to him from the doorstep. He now understood it all; his hands fell by his side; he stood up, and his face changed.

"If you please, is the lady better?" inquired a voice without. "I thought I heard you calling, sir. Do you feel better, ma'am? Deary me!" cried the good woman, beholding Matilda's averted face and heaving bosom—"Deary me! she is bad. But that's always the way with the 'sterics, they say, sir," turning to the gentleman; "and 'sterics after an accident comes natural! It will do the poor thing good to cry a bit."

Without a word, Challoner led the speaker to the door, for she had advanced to the sofa, and was standing in contemplation of the unhappy Matilda, as she thus delivered her opinion.

"You think she had best not be meddled with, sir? And to be sure, I bain't no great hand at doctoring. Well-a-well! Then you'll kindly call again if you want anything? There's more of the sal-volatile;" but the door had closed.

Challoner had closed it. Then he went and stood by the window, and heard the gusts of wind pass by. It seemed as if there were nothing left for him to do now. All was over, and he found himself dully wondering how it had ever gone on so long.

. . . . .

"Mr Challoner?"

He turned.

"If you have anything—to say," said Lady Matilda, in a hoarse whisper—"I should like—I should wish—I will hear it before we part now, and part for ever. This shameful scene may end now. Be quick; I wish to be alone. Be quick—and—go."

"Lady Matilda——" he stopped.

"Well?"

"I have nothing to say."

"Nothing, Mr Challoner?—*nothing*?"

He bowed.

"You have *nothing* to say," she proceeded, with a slow

frown gathering over her brow; "and yet I was more than 'Lady Matilda' just now. I was—was I not?—all that was most dear, most beloved; and you have 'nothing' to say now? Say *something*, sir—you can surely think of *something*," cried she, with rising anger; "you were ready enough with your falsehoods a few minutes ago."

"They were no falsehoods," murmured Challoner almost inaudibly.

She stopped to listen, and listened on until he spoke again.

"They were no falsehoods. *You* know that. For the rest, I repeat, I have nothing to say."

"You cannot even defend yourself."

"I will not defend myself."

"By heavens!" burst forth Matilda in a passion of irrepressible scorn—"by heavens! this is the man who says he loves me, and swears I am dear to him—who had almost made me forget myself, and—and—oh, what am I saying? I that have been so duped, so deceived,—I that would have——" suddenly her hands came together, and she wrung them in her agony.

Challoner's lips moved, but no sound escaped them.

"He loves me and weds another," cried Matilda, beginning again. "He kisses me, and vows to her. I am only one of two; and she, the other, has the prior claim. She, poor girl, has the right to this man—this hypocrite: she can claim him—thank God it *is* she, and not I. Go to her, Mr Challoner," gathering fresh disdain with every sentence—"go quickly, lest another come in your way, and you are tempted again, and—and—oh, go to her; she knows nothing as yet. There is plenty of time. Go, and she will receive you with open arms; she suspects nothing. The marriage is to be immediately,—oh, I know all about it. She is very confiding; she does not ask where Mr Challoner passes his time when he is not at Clinkton; she likes him to enjoy himself, and make the most of his

ante-nuptial holiday—oh, poor girl, poor girl!" cried the speaker, dropping all at once her accents of bitter mockery—"poor—poor—miserable—ill-fated girl——"

Challoner raised his head, and looked out of the window.

"Is she, too, your 'dearest?' Is she also your love?" The wretched Matilda was struggling for a hold on her emotions. "Is she—is she——"

No reply.

"Speak!" shrieked Matilda, and fell back on the sofa, senseless.

When she came again to herself, all was as before, and consciousness returning more speedily than at first, she became almost at once aware of Challoner's presence at her side, and his voice close to her ear sent an involuntary thrill throughout her frame. Challoner was using restoratives, which he had instantly procured; and as soon as he perceived these to be no longer needed, he retreated a pace, and assumed the tone of a physician.

"You must not again exert yourself, Lady Matilda, or the consequences may really be serious. You must be so good as to remain perfectly quiet now. No one will come in, and I—I shall not annoy you."

Presently he saw the tears flowing over her cheeks.

"If I have been unjust to you," she murmured, "say it."

He could not say it.

"If you have not deceived two women who trusted you, and who could have—loved you, say it."

Again he could not.

"Only one thing," implored she, fixing on him her eye,—could he ever in years to come forget the anguish depicted in that dark, full, swimming eye?—"only one thing: *which?*"

Then she knew by his face which, and hid her own.

("If I could only leave her now," thought Challoner, in



justice to whom it must be said that fear of the effect a continuance of such emotions might have on the unhappy Matilda in her present state predominated; "my being here—but I cannot go till I have seen her in better hands. I cannot go, unless she herself sends me. Will that carriage ever come?"

Then he heard his name again, and took a swift resolution.

"Lady Matilda," he said, "I—I had better go. I cannot see you, hear you, be with you thus, and keep my senses longer. Because I have played the fool, I need not play the madman, and—shall I go?"

He almost thought she would have said "No." He hardly yet knew Matilda.

"Yes, go," she answered, solemnly—"go to her whom you have wronged still more cruelly than you have wronged me. She has not even your love—such as it is. Go to her, and on your knees, in the sight of God, tell her the truth at last. Promise before God to be false to her no more. She may forgive you,—some women are forgiving,—I," said Matilda, and a pale light fell on her face from without—"I am not one of them."

After a short pause, she held out her hand; he knelt, overpowered by his own bitter feelings, to take it,—it may have been but a few seconds, it may have been longer,—  
"Go, go," she whispered faintly,—and deaf and dumb and blind to all beside, out into the cold wet dusk he went.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

## ALL GONE IN AN HOUR.

"Fortune makes quick despatch, and in a day  
May strip you bare as beggary itself."

—CUMBERLAND.

"Oh Lord, Mr Challoner, Mr Edward is over the cliff!"

"Over the devil! What are you talking about?"

Challoner threw off roughly a man who seized upon him as he emerged from the cottage, and in whom he scarcely recognised Lady Matilda's usually silent and attentive groom Charles, the same whom he had himself despatched for aid so shortly before, but who with affrighted countenance and disordered speech was now full of a new disaster.

"Oh Lord, sir,—it's true, sir!" cried he. "It's Mr Edward, sir. He was riding along the downs here just now, and——"

"Mr Edward is not at home, you fool."

"He is, sir,—he was, sir,—oh what am I saying? He was at home only an hour ago; but he'll never be at home any more,—oh Lord, and he such a fine gentleman!"

"Speak sense, can't you?" he was shaken rudely by the shoulder. "What has happened? What——"

"It was to Endhill he went first, sir,—he went before you came home, Mr Challoner; then you went the same way, but you came down the byroad,—but Mr Edward, he rides straight home again as soon as ever he finds my lady not there; and then, when he finds her not at home neither, and hears you was off to meet her, he falls a-swearing,"—the man was too much excited to care what he said,—"and nothing would serve him but to be off after you."

"And he has been thrown too? And all this time—where is he all this time?"

"Oh Lord, sir, it's no use now! They are all there—my lord, and all of them——"

"——Oh," said Challoner, stopping short.

"'Twas right along here he was coming, sir, him and Trumpeter—the coast-guard see them going along like anything—and all in a minute down they went, not twenty yards from the place where you ran out upon us, sir. It was a slip, sure enough, sir; and you was right enough, and there they are both lying now,—oh Lord! oh Lord!" and the poor fellow broke off, blubbering like an infant.

"Stop that, confound you!" said Challoner, who had himself had about as much as he could bear. "Stop that, and—what the deuce does it all mean? I don't understand," putting up his hand to his hot head.

"The place is close by, sir," Charles made an effort and began again,—“a little bit of a slip that wouldn't ha' hurt a fly if Mr Edward had been walking,—he'd ha' had a tumble, and no harm done; but it was that great brute of a horse—he never would ride nothing but Trumpeter—and the men says they went down like a flash, and Mr Edward's neck's broke, and Trumpeter, they are going to shoot him—oh Lord!”—with a start and a fresh outbreak as the report of a gun close at hand carried its own interpretation to the minds of both. “Oh—oh—oh,” began the groom——

“——If you don't hold that d——d tongue of yours,” said Challoner in a cold, dangerous tone, “I'll pitch you down the place after them, and you may break your neck too, if you choose. Tell me the rest, and tell it, in God's name, so that I can understand. Is Mr Edward killed?”

“Never spoke nor moved since they got at him, sir,” sobbed the man—“never raised so much as a finger;

and his head's all a-hanging down, and Mr Whewell, he says——"

"*Whewell!*"

"Mr Whewell is there, and them all, sir."

"*Whewell!* I must be mad. Go on—*go on!* *Whewell!* Who next?"

"My lord is just standing by as if he never would move or speak again in this world; and Mr Hanwell, 'twas he sent me to tell you: they are afraid of *her* hearing," looking back at the cottage, "so I was to get at you quiet—that was how we was so long, sir; and see here, sir, here's the very place; and Mr Whewell says there ain't no hope whatever, for he has been dead this half-hour. Oh Lord!"—under his breath—"and such a little bit of a slip too!"

"Do you say, do you mean that it was this very place that I warned you of which gave way with him?" said Challoner, a new and strange vibration in his pulses. "Good God! And if I had been five minutes later——"

"We'd ha' been down as sure as fate, Mr Challoner. Two of us—and there was only one of he: Oh Lord! the ground must ha' been just like a piece of rotten cake, it must. Oh, I told her ladyship twice the ground warn't fit to go on; but she'd no more listen to me than——"

"——And it was *here?*" continued Challoner, unheeding,—"here?" his tone betraying the awe and horror in his breast. "And is that—I can't see——" straining his eyeballs to pierce the gloom,—"is that *them?*"

"Them it is, sir!" He was responded to in a whisper as low as his own, for the group which had gathered around the dead man was not a couple of hundred yards off.

Challoner stood still with compressed lips.

"Aren't you going on, sir?"

No reply.

"They are expecting you, sir."

Still no movement.

"I was sent to bring you——"

"——Tchah! Be quiet, can't you?" He could have struck the fellow for his officious and intolerable suggestions. "You go down to your master and say—I am coming—or, stop——"

"My lord sees you; he is coming towards us, sir."

Whatever Challoner had intended doing was thus perforce set aside. The two hands met; there was a silence, with averted faces; then, without a word, they stumbled forward together over the loose clods and turf to the fatal spot.

Here were assembled what seemed to be quite a large number of men and boys, a spectral group of figures in the dim light,—for those who had beheld the accident had, in terrified haste, made it known far and wide without loss of an instant—and the result was, that the first confused impression Challoner's overstrained faculties received was that he was confronted by every face he had ever seen or known at Overton. That so many people had been so quickly got together in such a lonely spot was his next foolish wonder.

The truth was, he had no idea how long a time had elapsed since he had last known or cared anything about what was going on in the outer world. For him there had only been one thought, one agony. Within that little room he had been living a great death; and in the retrospect, all the bitterness of that bitter dream might have been concentrated into a single drop. He had destroyed the sense of time.

In reality, however, a full hour had gone by.

The landslip had taken place within a very short time of his having seen that it was impending, having been doubtless precipitated by the weight and force of a horse and rider; and now all that was left of the young life so ruthlessly cut short were cold inanimate remains, already

growing stiff in death. That the end had been instantaneous was apparent, and this was the only sad consolation.

"Went down with the slip," whispered one of the sailors in Challoner's ear, as he and Lord Overton mutely joined the group. "We, my mates and I, was up there, and saw him come ridin' hard along the bank; and as he went by, one of our chaps says, 'That's too near,' and we turned to look. I don't know if we hollared to him or not; the next thing was, Bill here cried, 'He's down!' and we down with our things and after him as hard as we could run. Soon as we get to the top, we sees him lyin' just where he is now, and we all come down—for 'tis easy enough to get at it, ye see—and as soon as we come nigh the gentleman, I says to Bill," in a still deeper whisper, "says I, 'He's done for.' Knowed it fra the first, by the way he was lyin'. The horse was over there, throwin' out his legs——"

"How soon did you get down?"

"Warn't two seconds, sir. Less time than it takes tellin', we was all here; and we lifted him up and pulled open his collar, and one of them fetched water, and we turned him this way and that way,—no use, no use," shaking his head mournfully, "not a breath was left in his body; and that gentleman there says, 'tis the neck that's broke. He must ha' pitched right on to it, over the horse's head. The slip's nothing—bits like that is always comin' away; and now, with all the snow that's been on it, and soakin' into it for days and days, one would ha' thought any gentleman about here would ha' knowed to keep off the edge. They say he is the Earl of Overton's brother. Bill says so. I'm new to these parts, though I've lived along the coast all my days. It's the same coast all along. Well, the Lord's will be done, poor lad. And the horse too!"

Dumbly Challoner stood. He did not hear much, he

did not feel much—that is to say, he was not conscious of feeling. Now that the woful scene before him began solemnly to assert its right to a place, to *the* place in his mind, from very excess and complexity of emotions he found himself gradually becoming calm. Bareheaded in the cold rain, and with the salt air blowing on his brow, he stood with the rest, tongue-tied and petrified, gazing on the dead.

Poor, beautiful, unfortunate Teddy! Hapless brother, —Matilda's brother,—her care, her charge, the object of her tenderness, the solace of her loneliness. This was all that was left to her now. One brief hour had robbed her on this side and on that—had snatched by different ways a brother and a lover: cruel fate had struck her twice with deadly aim ere she had had time to draw a breath between.

At intervals he heard the hoarse whispering of the men, who were uneasily endeavouring to recollect or suggest anything appropriate to the scene; but even these by degrees died away, for one and all had already looked, and touched, and felt the cold limp hands, and listened at the fallen lips, and had severally drawn back with a shadow upon their rough weather-beaten faces. They were now solemnly still, or only broke the silence to groan a smothered ejaculation or heave a sigh.

At length Whewell rose.

He had been kneeling upon the wet turf, supporting in his arms the lifeless clay, and in his own active mind, even while thus engaged, considering what might best be done for the afflicted family,—how information should be given to the authorities, the shock softened to Lady Matilda, Lord Overton spared more painful effort than was needful—how, in short, everything should be done that could be done to mitigate the terrors of the scene.

To explain how he and Robert Hanwell came there, we

must just inform our readers that they had been met on the road between Endhill and Overton, and had been informed of the disaster even before tidings had been carried to the Hall. Robert had undertaken to be himself the bearer of these, while Whewell had at once hastened to the fatal spot. He now arose and addressed Challoner.

"We want to get Lord Overton away," he said in a low aside. "There is really nothing to be done, poor fellow; it has been all over some time—indeed there is not a doubt that the end was instantaneous, for the neck is broken, and these men say he has never stirred since. If Lord Overton would go; but Hanwell does not like to press him—could you?"—inquiringly.

"Yes—what?" replied Challoner, struggling to be equally clear-sighted. "What—ah—do you want?"

"Get Lord Overton away. Tell him there is nothing to be done. It is nonsense Hanwell's saying he does not like to intrude; we are all getting wet through, and the night is coming on. It will be difficult enough as it is. Get him away now, if you can; and Lady Matilda——"

Challoner looked up sharply.

"Where is she?" continued the speaker, with a sudden change of tone.

Challoner turned away.

"If we don't take care, some of these fools will blurt it all out to her as it stands, and there will be the devil to pay if they do," said Whewell, shortly. "You know where Lady Matilda is? They say she has been thrown from her horse too. Is that the case?"

"Yes."

"Hurt?"

"No."

"I will take Lord Overton to the cottage where his sister is," said Challoner, after a moment's hesitation.



"I will show him the place and leave him there. Then I will go on to the Hall——"

"——Ay, and tell them to have a room ready—you understand? Yes, that will do. Hanwell and I can wait here; we shan't go near the Overtons——"

"——Certainly not," said Challoner, with a scowl.

"And you will not either," observed Whewell, coolly. "They will be best by themselves. Look sharp, Challoner. I believe I hear the carriage——"

Challoner, without a word, put his hand through Lord Overton's arm, and led him unresistingly away.

"You are not going at once?"

It is an hour later, and the scene is once more laid in Overton Hall. Challoner has intimated that he is about to depart—he is no more needed; the tramp of feet has died away along the dim old gallery; the doors are shut; the voices are hushed; the weeping attendants, who shroud one silent chamber, move noiselessly hither and thither as they perform their last sad services to the dead. Just across the passage, with only a few feet between, lies another form almost as white, almost as cold, scarcely more alive than he. Below, Robert Hanwell and his friends sit in mute and doleful assemblage; and no one knows where Overton is.

"You are not going at once?" says Robert, whom circumstances thus compel to act the host. "It is seven o'clock, and you have had nothing—you must indeed oblige yourself to eat something, Challoner," apologetically; "you will be ill."

"I couldn't, thanks. I shall catch the evening train by going now. Don't say anything to any one. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. But I am sure if Lord Overton knew——"

Challoner hears no more. In the outer hall he encounters Overton, and again they confront each other point-blank without chance of escape.

"Yes, I understand. I do not ask you to stay." It is Overton who speaks. "I understand." He puts his hand to his eyes, turns away, comes back again, and holds it out. Challoner takes it, wrings it, wrenches it as though he never could let it go. It will, he says, never be offered to him again. He will never see that kindly face again. He will never more cross that threshold. His memory will be blotted out, his name be unmentioned. Oh that it had been he, and not the other, who on that night had been taken!

. . . When he arrives at his rooms, he finds a telegram which he ought to have had before, and which explains why Lady Fairleigh had not kept her appointment with him in the afternoon. He has almost forgotten that she had not done so. He reads the telegram stupidly. Reads that his father, who is at Paris, is dangerously ill, and that his presence is desired there at once. Reads, and feels that even this sad intelligence hardly concerns him at all. Wonders if anything else will ever concern him in this world again,—and thinks—not.

No. He thinks not.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### A CONSULTATION OVER THE COUNTER.

"To do anything in this world worth doing, we must not stand back shivering and shrinking, but jump in and scramble through as well as we can."—  
SYDNEY SMITH.

It will be remembered that, on arriving in London, after taking farewell of the sorrow-stricken house, where he could no longer stay, and to which he must never return, Challoner received a communication which, under other circumstances, would have concerned him deeply.

It was to the effect that his father, to whom, perhaps, he had never been very warmly attached, but for whom, nevertheless, he entertained a certain amount of filial affection and respect, and with whom certainly he had never had a word of difference in his life, had been seized with paralysis; and although the shock had not been fatal, and a partial rally had been already made, he was enjoined to lose no time in sending on the intelligence to the other members of the family—the brothers and sisters who were scattered somewhere or other up and down England,—and that done, he was to repair to the spot himself as speedily as possible.

The telegram was from Lady Fairleigh, and was sufficient explanation of her non-appearance in London on the morning of that day.

Of that day! Could it really be only that day, that one day which had made so terrible a havoc? Could it only have been a few hours before that he had, fool that he was! exulting in his new reprieve, dashed back from the hotel, caught, as by a miracle, the earlier train, snapped his fingers at consequences, and laughed in his heart at his own weird uncanny success in everything connected with his dreadful part?

How one and all seemed resolved to play into his hands at every turn! How kindly he was pressed to pursue his own pleasure! How he was humoured, and coaxed, and all made smooth for him to be base! Mary so accommodating, Matilda so bewitching, Overton so blind, the Applebys so innocent; and now even his own sister, the one being on earth whose keen eyes he dreaded, and before whom even his hardy spirit had quailed when obeying her summons—even she had, it appeared, yielded to the prevailing influence.

Fate had decreed that he was not to be disturbed nor interfered with. It was really too kind of fate.

With such grim humour the infatuated man had

amused himself as he sped back to Overton Hall, and incredible as it now seemed, it was but a few hours since all had been dispelled, and the dream for ever shattered ; he had now to force himself, as best he might, to remember that he had still a stage to act upon, and that, however detestable must in future be the play, and however little was left for him to gain, he must for very shame hold on.

He did not say to himself, he did not know that he felt the sad tidings awaiting him to be an actual relief ; he would have started to be told that the intelligence which should have been so gravely urgent was now so little to him that he could scarcely give it sufficient attention to comprehend its contents, until a second, and even a third, perusal had made them clearer,—but it was so, that even when clear, the first vague feeling of sorrow was mingled with another and less suitable emotion—namely, a hope that the illness and the doubt which hung over its result, might prove so engrossing as to leave no room for inquiries or suspicion on any other subject.

That he would be off for Paris by the night mail was, however, a matter of course.

He was glad to go—glad to be on the move anywhere—almost thankful involuntarily for the good excuse for leaving England, and thus delaying a meeting with his betrothed bride and her family for the moment—and he was now only anxious to start ; and oh, that the short journey—far, far too short—could have gone on and on for ever !

Before leaving, however, it was necessary to inform the rest of the family, who were as yet in ignorance ; and where to write, or where to send to, was equally a problem. He had not a notion where a brother or a sister was to be found ; they had been nothing to him, he had been nothing to them during those past weeks of delirious bliss, or misery, which had filled to the full every thought.

All outside Overton Hall on the one hand, or the prison walls of the red brick mansion at Clinkton on the other, had been to him a blank ; and as to what Tom, Will, and Emily were doing now, where they had their present places of abode, even whether they were at the moment at home or abroad, he had not even a conjecture to go by.

He had not written to them, and he had not heard from them,—stop, though, he had heard, he supposed ; a dim remembrance of forwarded redirected envelopes, in familiar handwritings, lying about unopened in his collar-drawer at Overton Hall, rose before his eyes—and no doubt these would come up with his luggage next day, for he had left on foot, desirous of troubling no one, and had brought nothing with him ; but next day would be, or might be, too late,—he could not wait on the chance. And accordingly, contenting himself with sending to the old family seat a telegram, which was sure to find out some one in the long-run, Challoner lost no time in himself hurrying to his parent's bedside, there to find all pretty much as it had been when Lady Fairleigh first despatched her message.

“Was there ever anything so unfortunate?” bewailed poor Mary Tufnell, who, now that her Christmas festivities were over, and that Clinkton was rather more than ordinarily dull, it being the season of Lent, when it was quite the thing to follow the fashion and have nothing going on, even of the mild order usually indulged in by the good people of the town—now that Emily was having it all her own way, and that Herbert and the cathedral were in the ascendant, began to miss her own swain more than she might otherwise have done, and who was, moreover, willing in her heart to do still more, as we shall presently see,—“Was there ever anything so unfortunate?” bemoaned she, as week after week went by, and still there was nothing new to be said, no change of any

kind to be reported. "I am so sorry for poor Jem; it really does seem as if poor Jem were in perpetual ill luck now. Just to think of his being at Overton Hall when that poor Mr Lessingham was killed—and he could only have gone down for a day or two, for the Hales told Bertha that Mr Lessingham particularly mentioned that he was only to be with them for a day or two—and then to come in for that! The very day after Bertha saw Mr Lessingham too! I don't know why that made it worse, but it did. And the same night to hear about his father! Jem does not mind about things as much as some people, but I never could see there was any harm in his letter, though it was a little *queer*. He did not want to show that he cared, I suppose: of course he did care—everybody cares about their father. And I mean always to stand by Jem; for after all, if I'm content, it's nobody else's business whether he takes things coolly or not. It was like Miss Bertha's impertinence to hint at that yesterday. Coolly? What can the poor man do? He has got to stay where he is, whether or no? Well, now, I do think as poor old Mr Challoner had lived so long, that he might have lived just a little longer——"

"——Or, if he would only die a little quicker, poor old man!" amended her mother, for the last words had been spoken aloud, and Mrs Tufnell had heard them with true sympathy; "there's where it is, Mary. I am sure I, for one, don't see the sense of dying on and on,—and I must say, if it were not Providence, that six weeks is really *overly*. If it had been six days now—your poor grandpapa was six full days dying in his bed,—neither here nor there, as one may say,—no good to any one on this side the grave, and only kept back by the doctors' fussing from a better place.

"Six days we had of it, all of us gathered together, expecting and expecting,—and they were six days such as I hope I may never see again in this world, Mary, I

can tell you. Not that we wanted him gone, poor thing; there wasn't one of us but would have kept him if we could—kept him, that is, to be well and hearty; but that, you know, he never would have been. It was as clear as day that he had got to go, sooner or later, and——well we were just worn out, that was the real truth; what with the Bibles and Prayer-books,—you know I mean no harm, Mary—but your poor grandmamma would have us all sitting up with our Bibles and Prayer-books for six whole days on end—and it was just awful, that's what it was. Your aunt Cecy, she wouldn't stand it. She locked her door and read 'Punch'; that was what she did. Cecy was a dreadful girl when she was put upon, and none of us dared say a word; and grandmamma does not know to this day what that door was locked for—but the rest of us knew well enough, for Cecy made no bones about it; and I'm sure I for one couldn't blame her, poor dear. Six weeks!" after a pause. "Six weeks to-day; and goodness knows how much longer it may go on! Well, there are troubles and troubles in this world, but I do say six weeks—and no sort of end to it! Don't you fret though, Mary. It will make your bonny man all the happier when the good time comes; and I am sure I don't know how we shall ever make enough of him then for all he has had to put up with beforehand; that's what I think whenever I think of Jem Challoner. Dear heart, I say to myself, what shall we ever do to comfort him?"

"It is hard," said Mary, thoughtfully. "You see," she continued, twisting a pencil in her fingers, and scribbling with it on the blank side of a letter near—there usually was a blank side to Jem's letters; write as large as he might, he could never manage to fill more than half of the third page. "You see," said his betrothed, ruminating, "Easter falls so very early this year."

"Easter!" exclaimed her mother. "What—what in

the world have you to do with Easter, my dear? If it had been Emily—but Lent is all in all with Emily now—and sure you need not trouble your head with all those services——”

“——It is not that,” said Mary, laughing; “I don’t care about Easter one way or other. But as father said Easter——” she stopped.

“Said what about Easter?”

“That—that we might be married at Easter.”

“Oh, now I know what you mean, my girl!” cried her mother, joyously. “To be married at Easter! That’s it, is it? To be married at Easter! Oho! Now I know where I am! For I declare I could not think for a minute what you were driving at, Mary. Since this unfortunate affair of poor old Mr Challoner, and expecting him to die every day, and he never dying, and now as likely as not to cheat us all—Lor’ sakes! what am I saying? But it had put me so about, that I had no thoughts of the marriage coming off yet a bit. However, it’s as you and papa settle it, for I’m agreeable to anything. And now I know where I am!” she concluded, nodding her satisfaction.

“Papa said Easter,” responded Mary, eagerly. “And I know Emily wants Easter, and Herbert can arrange for Easter. I promised Emily I would speak about it, as she does not like, because of Jem. Of course we all know that Jem would be pleased, as he even wanted Christmas, you remember,—but it is old Mr Challoner;—if old Mr Challoner——”

“Ay, it is old Mr Challoner who is the spoke in the wheel,” said Mrs Tufnell, promptly. “Poor old dear, that I should say so! But really such a time to take—but that’s nonsense of me, for of course he didn’t pick and choose his own time——”

“Well, but what can we do?” interrupted her practical daughter; “it is of no use lamenting. ‘Care killed a



cat;' and I'm not going to bother and worry about it; only I do think we might manage *something*. There will be so much to see to once we begin,—but I don't want to begin and then have to stop. Besides, I must have my things *nice*, and Emily says so too; that was one reason why we waited till the spring—that the spring fashions might have come in," and she sighed regretfully.

"Does Jem say anything, any way, my dear?"

"Oh yes; he says that as soon as ever he can be spared—but that's nothing, you know, that tells us nothing, for of course we are not to know how soon he can be spared,—however, he says that—let me see," reading the part aloud, "'As soon as ever I can be spared I shall at once return to England and hold myself in readiness to fulfil our contract.' 'Fulfil our contract,'" said Mary, looking up. "It is an odd way of putting it, isn't it? Who ever heard of an engagement being called a contract?"

"Oh, 'tis only one of his aristocratic phrases, my dear. Jem is chock-full of aristocratic ways and whims, and I tell papa that that is what he likes about Jem. But don't you go and take it up, Mary, for papa would never stand it from you, mind; I know what he thinks. Many and many a time I have heard him say, "'Tis all very well when 'tis bred in the bone,—what's bred in the bone will come out in the flesh,'—but he can see through any make-believe as well as anybody. There's nothing riles papa more than the airs Willie Dobb gives himself. That poor Willie! He means no harm; and for my part I am very fond of Willie, and he may yaw-haw as much as he likes for me—but papa says it regularly turns his stomach; and you know, Mary, how he would go on if he took up the idea that you were following in Willie Dobb's steps. I would not have papa thinking you were setting up for an aristocrat for the world."

"I am as good any day," retorted Mary, with a toss of

her spruce head. "Papa should not have let me marry into the Challoner family if he wished me to go about as their inferior."

"Now, now, now; don't be peppery, Mary. You know I have to be go-between with you and papa sometimes, for you are his own daughter all the world over, and you and he would fly out at each other every other day if I didn't take care. Papa thinks all the more of you for it, that's what he does, honest man; he thinks far too much of you, Mary, and——"

"——Much obliged, I'm sure; I find no fault with that," smiled her daughter, with restored complacency. "And now what am I to say to Jem? Can I say anything about Easter? It is so difficult to know what to say. I can't inquire point-blank if his father will be dead by Easter, and that's what I really want to know, but——"

"But you could just ask him if he had any sort of idea—express it delicately, remember,—anything we could go upon? I'll tell you what, Mary,—suppose I was just to step down and speak to Dr Bell—but Dr Bell is attending Miss Juliet Appleby, and I don't above half like, and that's the truth; I kind of fancy he is infectious still, though he smells of camphor as strong as my old fur tippet."

"Pooh! I'm not afraid," said Mary, stoutly. "And as for Miss Juliet Appleby, people are seeing her herself now. It is nearly two months since she was taken ill."

"Nay, it can't be that, surely."

"It is indeed. It was on the morning before Christmas Day, the morning of the fancy ball—or rather the night before—for it came out afterwards that she had been ill all the night before,—and that will be two months next Thursday. Why, lots of people at the Prestons' yesterday were talking about going to see her; the Prestons themselves offered to drive me out——"

"——Don't you go, Mary; not for the world."

"——I am not going, I don't know Miss Appleby, nor the Windlasses,—as papa is so foolish he won't let us call on them, and this would have been such a good opportunity; numbers of people did it,—but I am only telling you to show that you need not be afraid of seeing Dr Bell. I think you might see Dr Bell."

"And ask how long it generally takes?" said Mrs Tufnell, thoughtfully. "Well I might—though I own I don't half like it. I shall be well camphored if I do go," more briskly; "he shan't have all the camphor upon his side. Or, Mary," with a new idea, "I'll tell you what, Mary, I'll meet him at the chemist's; I know he goes to Scilly, so I can drop in at Scilly's this morning and ask what time he is likely to be there. It is generally of an afternoon I have seen him turn in. Then Scilly will let me sit the wrong side of the counter, and I can have all the bottles and powders between me and the doctor. The doctor is a sensible man; I can speak to him quite comfortably. He knows the plight we are in, and he will understand, being a family man himself, that one must speak about such things. Of course it would be more decent to wait patiently," half relenting; "but then," picking up again, "young folks can't be expected to wait patiently. And to be sure, there's Emily to be thought of as well. I shall put it upon Emily I do declare. And then if Dr Bell says Easter—why, Easter let it be."

Everything favoured her. The obsequious chemist was only too much flattered by being allowed to induct one of his best customers into his own arm-chair behind the counter; the doctor arrived punctually, and was accommodated on the other side, and old Mr Challoner's expected demise was discussed throughout the length and breadth of every doubt and chance, and why and wherefore.

On the whole, the conclusion arrived at was satisfactory. The old gentleman might die, or he might recover. He would probably do one or other, and that he should do one or other was all, Mrs Tufnell protested, she desired. What she objected to, as she explained to her companion, was the shilly-shallying that was going on—of course she did not mean to accuse any one in particular; of course he must not think she meant for a moment to reflect on old Mr Challoner, or upon his son—the latter indeed, poor dear, was more to be pitied than any one,—but she was sure Dr Bell must see it was a hard case, and excuse her if she spoke plainly. The truth was, the girls were getting impatient, and Mr Tufnell had said something about Easter; and if Mary could not be married at Easter, Emily's bridal would be but a poor affair, for all along they had set their hearts on having the two in one. And indeed, so urgently was the worthy gentleman made to see that there was nothing for it but that the girls must be gratified, the weddings must come off, old Mr Challoner must, in short, die,—that he was speedily brought to pronounce, with all the authority of his order, that die he would—or recover.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

## A DOUBTFUL INVITATION.

"So every sweet with sour is tempered still,  
That maketh it be coveted the more;  
For easy things that may be got at will  
Most sorts of men do set but little store "

—SPENSER.

"Well, now, I have got it all for you as pat as you please." Mrs Tufnell entered her own parlour radiant

from the interview recorded in the last chapter. "I am right-down glad I went, Mary," she continued, for Mary was there, awaiting in some anxiety what there might be to tell; "it was just the best thought possible, that of seeing Dr Bell. We may begin upon the hemming and stitching as soon as we like, he says; and, dear me! we have not too much time for all there will be to be done, if we are to be ready by Easter. The great thing is, however, will old Mr Challoner be ready by Easter? Bless me! I didn't mean to say that. Never you heed me, Mary; you know I mean no harm."

"What did Dr Bell say?" demanded Mary, briefly.

"Says we may take his word for it that the poor old gentleman,—you know he *is* old, Mary, and we must all die some time,—and so Dr Bell says he will either be dead and buried by Easter, or he will be out of all danger for the present. For the present, he says; well, that's all we care about,—ahem,—I mean, all we have to think about. So that's settled, and a great comfort it is to have a man like Dr Bell to go to. So now, Mary, you just write straight away to Paris, and say——"

"What am I to say?" For the speaker paused.

"Oh, you must put it into your own words, my dear; but 'twill be easy to show that you are thinking about Easter. You might perhaps mention that Emily was thinking about Easter. No? Would that not do? Could you put it on papa? But papa might find out, and it would put him in such a temper. And really so fine an old gentleman as old Mr Challoner—I would not for all the world seem to hurry him. But just you get in the word 'Easter,' Mary, and see what comes of it."

Then Mary had something to say on her own account. "Such an odd thing, mamma! what do you think? You know, this morning we were talking about Miss Juliet Appleby, and about my going to see her."

"Nay, Mary; it was about your *not* going. No going

to see Miss Juliet Appleby or Miss Juliet anybody, who is just out of the small-pox, with *my* consent!" exclaimed Mrs Tufnell, with unwonted decision. "Now, my dear, don't you think of it. For, letting alone the infection, papa would never hear of your making up to the Windlasses, and paying them the compliment of going out to the Court. He declares the Windlasses think themselves too grand for us Clinkton folks, and that they must be laughing in their sleeves at all the fuss we make now that they are in trouble. If they do, it is very ungrateful of them, I must say," said the good woman, with a heightened colour, "and I told papa he ought not to think such ill thoughts of any one; but still, for all that, I must say I would not, unasked, go to the Court."

"But suppose you were asked?"

"That, I am never likely to be; and sure, even if I were——"

"——But *I* have been," cried her daughter, triumphantly. "Really and truly I am not joking,—not joking in the least. I have been asked to the Court, not exactly by the Windlasses, but, better still, by this very Miss Juliet Appleby about whom there has been all the stir!"

"Lor'!" exclaimed her mother.

"What do you think of that, mamma? Miss Appleby wishes to see me; to make my acquaintance, as she is a very particular friend of Jem's. Very particular friend, she said. She sent me ever so pretty a message; she has seen no one yet; and I am the first person she wishes to see."

"Lor'! Jem is taking you into high society already," observed Mrs Tufnell, with maternal gratification, and for the moment every other feeling subsided into the background.

"So, then, the Prestons asked me if I could go to-morrow," proceeded Mary, sensible of the effect produced, "and——"

But this was another thing. "Oh, really I do not know; I could not say 'Yes' to that, Mary, not all at once. We shall have to think it over," rejoined Mrs Tufnell, untying her bonnet-strings. "Don't hurry me, child, and I'll see what can be done. To be sure, there's Dr Bell—what a comfort that man is!—and I can say you have been invited to go" (proud to say it); "I can tell him of the message, and he must decide. But don't you be too hopeful, Mary—not of to-morrow, at all events. It would be a pretty thing if anything were to happen to you next—far worse than old Mr Challoner, poor man."

"Now don't you begin with any nonsense, mamma; nothing is going to happen to me," replied her daughter, gaily. "I can take care of myself. I made no promise to the Prestons."

"That's right; never make promises."

"But if they ask me again, I don't see why I should not go."

Mrs Tufnell sighed.

"Papa," she said that evening, "here is our Mary has had a queer kind of an invitation: of course it is meant as a compliment; but all the same, it is a compliment we could do without, like an invitation to a funeral,—Miss Juliet Appleby has sent to ask Mary to go and see her."

"Sent to Mary!" said he, opening his eyes.

"Ay, indeed; sent to Mary."

"But what—sent to Mary! What in the world does she know about Mary?"

"Jem's friend, you know. She is Jem Challoner's friend. You remember he said so when he was here. When the ball——"

"——Oh, ay! I remember. But I don't see that being Jem's friend,—however,"—for the thought of Jem was mollifying—"no doubt 'tis meant civilly. The Windlasses are coming round, are they? What is Mary asked to? To dine? Or to stop?"

"Oh, neither, my dear. Just to drive out of an afternoon with the Prestons——"

"——With the Prestons?" His face fell.

"The invitation came through the Prestons," continued his wife.

"It was no invitation at all then."

"Oh, it was well meant, my dear! And the poor girl is not able for writing yet, no doubt. She is only just well enough to——"

"——To give her small-pox to others. The devil she is!"

"Fie, fie, papa! and before the girls too. But in the main I agree with papa, Mary. You know I told you so; and though she is Jem's friend, she can wait a week or two before she becomes yours."

"Oh, she can't do that, not for a moment!" cried Mr Tufnell, sarcastically. "Mary might have been Mary Tufnell long enough before Miss Juliet Appleby, or the Windlasses either, would have troubled their heads about her; but if she is to be Mrs Challoner, even though it is only poor Jem, the youngest of them all, with ne'er a penny—— now Mary, my girl, don't look like that—I like your lad well enough; he has been fair and honest with me, and if he has no money, why, you have enough for both, and so I told him,—but what I mean is, these infernal—hem—aristocrats, they hang on to one another like boys at prisoner's base. You are worth speaking to now, because you are to marry into a county family; but you might have trudged about the streets of Clinkton all your life, and never had a nod or beck from one of the whole set, if you had taken a plain Clinkton man like your poor old father."

"I don't see what that has to do with it," said Mary  
"If Miss Appleby wishes to be friendly——"

"——Oh, be friendly, be friendly, if you like——"

"——Why should I hold out against her?"



"No reason at all. None that I can see." Mr Tufnell was still ironical.

"Then, may I go to the Court to-morrow?"

"Ah, but that's another pair of boots. As long as you are under my roof, I am bound to see that you don't bring your necks into danger. When you and Emily have husbands of your own, it will be their business to look after you; and I hope," more good-temperedly, "I hope they will be able to manage it—I never could. You have had it your own way, you girls, with both your mother and me. Well, well, we have rubbed along pretty comfortably on the whole, I must say; and you have not been bad girls as girls go. I suppose you will lord it over your husbands next, eh? Well, well, I shan't interfere; that's their look-out; you will be off my hands by that time: but, hang it all! after bullying your poor old father all his days, don't go and get the small-pox because you can't say 'No' to Miss Juliet Appleby."

Now Mary Tufnell had very special cause for finding this injunction hard to bear.

In stating that Miss Appleby had sent to ask her to Windlass Court, and had given as her reason for doing so that she was desirous of becoming acquainted with the future wife of a friend, Mary had indeed told the truth, but she had not told the whole truth. There had been a secret message accompanying the ostensible one. It was to the effect that the sender had a communication to make, which, she believed, would justify her in asking that no time should be lost, and that Miss Tufnell should repair to the Court without delay. The communication referred to Mr Challoner.

Now the ambassador to whom this was intrusted was Miss Fanny Preston, the very person to do so important and mysterious an embassy full justice. Miss Preston had been out at the Court several times after Juliet had arrived there, and before she was taken ill; and the two

girls had run up an intimacy which had seemed much closer than it actually was when Juliet became for the nonce the heroine of Clinkton. Then Fanny Preston felt sure that she had known her very well indeed; and her many attentions and sympathy were amply rewarded when one day she was begged, through the medium of a disinfected note, to get at Mary Tufnell, and bring her out to the Court, baiting the hook with the suggestive message about Jem Challoner.

It took at once. It was romantic; that answered with Miss Preston. It promised fun; that drew Mary Tufnell.

Both young ladies having thus fully made up their minds to go, "Dear," said Fanny, putting in an appearance the following morning—it was a bright, clear, invigorating February morning—"dear, don't you think that if your parents knew *why*, they would take off their prohibition?"

"Oh, there was no prohibition about it," retorted Mary, briskly. "Papa invariably growls and snaps if anything is proposed out of the common way; but he never means half he says, and no one really minds. We just let him have it out, and then we do as we please. And mamma would be all right if Dr Bell——"

"What! she goes by Dr Bell, does she? Then I'll tell you what, Mary, come along at once to Dr Bell's. We'll soon settle the doctor. He will give us leave, I know; for he has said over and over again that she might see anybody now, and that there has been no infection this long while past. Miss Appleby herself says that he has given her permission to receive visitors."

"Has he indeed?" said simple Mary.

"So you see it's all right. Come, I have the phaeton here, and I told Juliet I would be out in the morning: I knew you would be more likely to go in the morning; and we will take Dr Bell by the way, and be at the Court

before any one knows anything about us," cried the giddy girl heedlessly.

"But the Windlasses?"

"They are not at home. They left home last week. There, that shows you that it is safe enough. They would not have been allowed to go about, if there had been infection to be carried with them."

Very little more persuasion was needed. With a day so fresh and tempting, a phaeton so smart, and a friend so pressing and animated, who could have resisted? Certainly not Mary Tufnell; in a very few minutes she had equipped herself in her prettiest hat and tippet, and with her gloves in her hand to put on as they went—thus saving time, (but why so anxious to save time?)—the two rattled down the street at the brisk little pony's swiftest trot, and they were well away from the town ere either drew a breath, or ceased to look eagerly round every corner.

And then, "I declare I have quite forgotten Dr Bell," cried Fanny, laughing. "Well, never mind. I know for a positive certainty that he has said people may go; and if nobody begins to go, why nobody will follow. Some one must be the first. We shall be the first, Mary. Neither of us are likely subjects for disease, and I want so much to see how she looks, don't you? I forgot, though, you did not know her before. Well, she has had a bad time of it, poor thing, and one ought to be glad one can do anything——"

"——But I wish we had seen Dr Bell," said Mary.

"Bother Dr Bell! How could I be so stupid! We passed quite close to his house, too; but I was in such a fright lest we should be stopped. Have you been to the Windlasses'?" changing the subject hastily. "'Tis a fine place, but not so fine as the Challoners'. I envy you that, Mary; you will be quite at home there. I wonder," abruptly—"I wonder what it can be Miss Appleby has to say about—him."

So did her companion also wonder, with a *naïve* pleasurable certainty of its being something agreeable to listen to, and charming to repeat. Everything connected with her marrying Jem Challoner had hitherto been charming and agreeable; and as she had neither fears nor doubts about her future happiness—as she was proud of her conquest, and satisfied with all its accompaniments—it was without a ruffle on her brow, or a quickening of her pulse, that she heard the reply given to the young lady's request for admission—namely, that Miss Appleby would be glad if Miss Tufnell would step up-stairs; but that, as only one visitor could be allowed on this her first day of seeing anybody, perhaps Miss Preston would excuse being asked to wait below.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

MISS JULIET APPLEBY AND HER VISITOR.

“Malice scorn'd, puts out  
Itself; but argued, gives a kind of credit  
To the accusation.”

—MASSINGER.

“So good of you to come. Pray don't look at me. I know I am a fright, whatever they may say.”

The invalid sat up upon her cushions in a shaded room—Mrs Windlass's own sitting-room, given up for the occasion—and bent eagerly forward as the door opened. “So good of you. I have wanted so much to see you, Miss Tufnell, but I hardly liked to ask——”

“——Oh dear, I am very glad to come,” said Mary. “You can't think how sorry we have all been for you. We have talked of nothing else——”

“——Nothing else than poor me! Why, you cannot

mean that. And I that thought myself quite among strangers, so dreadfully forlorn,—I thought nobody cared whether I lived or died,” cried Juliet; “and even my own sister never came near me, everybody was so selfish. You cannot think, you cannot imagine, my dear Miss Tufnell, what it has been. I must tell you,” with a convalescent’s relish for recounting past miseries; “and all through my illness,” she continued, when the illness itself had been done ample justice to, “from beginning to end, you haunted me. You know I was taken ill the day of the fancy ball—or rather, I daresay you did not know, for, of course, I was of no consequence——”

“——Indeed you were. Of the very greatest consequence,” cried Mary, with the good-nature which accrued to all the family; “everybody said so. Everybody was talking about you at the ball.”

“At the ball? Nonsense. You don’t say so? Why, how things do fly! for I was only taken ill the morning of the ball. Do tell me about it,” her attention diverted for the moment. “Was it a success? Was it much of an affair? What was your dress?”

“I was only a hospital nurse, with a black gown and red cross——”

“——I know. I know the thing; and I daresay you looked lovely. You have quite the figure to carry it off. It is something to be able to wear black, too; and you have so much complexion,” with a glance at the cheek, in which the red lay if anything a trifle too lavishly. “Oh, you can go a dowdy, if you like,” nodded Miss Appleby, who meant to please; “but——now I, for instance, I should be nowhere if I had not something gay. I must show you mine some day,” and she proceeded to describe it at length.

But even fancy-ball dresses could not long seduce the narrator from the real object she had in view; and when the sleeves, and the frills, and the trimmings, and the

twistings had all been duly recounted, and had drawn forth the proper amount of admiration and exclamation, Miss Appleby took breath, and the two looked at each other, and knew as by instinct that they were both thinking of Jem Challoner.

"You must know," suddenly began Juliet, in a new tone, "I must begin by telling you that I had never heard of your engagement to my—my friend, Mr Challoner, until I came here. Naturally, I was much interested,—I was indeed, very much interested. To be frank, it took me most completely by surprise."

"Indeed?"

But there was nothing very wonderful in this. Why should Miss Appleby not have been surprised? it was rather jolly to surprise people, and Mary Tufnell's blue-eyed face showed she found it so.

"Indeed?" she said complacently, and her companion saw at once that she had not so far arrested her attention as she had meant to do.

"Mr Challoner is not with you now, is he?" she inquired.

"No; he is in Paris. His father——"

"I know. The poor old gentleman is dying; but as soon as he is gone you expect—that is, is your marriage to take place at once, may I ask? Pray forgive the inquiry from a stranger, but I have a very particular reason for asking," ran on Juliet glibly, for the sight of the smiling, rosy, hearty face of Challoner's unsuspecting bride somehow galled her anew to hate the man; and considering as she did, that Mary Tufnell really was being shamefully ill-used, and would be ready to be up in arms directly she was shown that it was so; and moreover, with the hope that she was at last about to punish the offender by means of a girl who (common-place looking, second-rate sort of thing, evidently,) would not scruple to throw him off on the spot,—with all this in

view, there was nothing to hinder her cat-like enjoyment of the scene.

“We are to be married at Easter,” replied her visitor readily. “I think you are an old friend of Jem’s,” she added, after a silence which Juliet ought to have filled, but which she purposely left void. “Miss Preston told me so.”

“Not an old friend, oh dear, no; that was Fanny Preston’s mistake. I never met Mr Challoner until the other day,” responded Miss Appleby. “But,” continued the speaker, slowly and pointedly, “since I *have* met him, I have seen him nearly every day, no, don’t mistake, my dear Miss Tufnell—I am not the attraction, not at all; but when I saw Mr Challoner, there *was* an attraction, no doubt. Do you follow me? I see you do. He was staying last November at a house where I am very intimate, at a neighbour’s in Sussex, at—in short, at Lord Overton’s.”

“At Lord Overton’s?”

“Yes; at Overton Hall. Overton Hall is not above two miles from us: we are their nearest neighbours: we are there constantly. Lady Matilda is my very greatest friend, and Lady Matilda was—Mr Challoner’s attraction.”

“Oh, is that all?” cried Mary, with a little laugh. “When you said attraction, I supposed you meant a girl,—you know what ‘attraction’ usually stands for? And I could not help being amused even then; because, if you really knew Mr Challoner, he is so—so very unsusceptible; but Lady Matilda—Lady Matilda Wilmot, is she not?—the widow lady who lives with her brother the earl, and has a married daughter who is——”

“——Yes, yes; that is she, no doubt. That is Lady Matilda as she would be described in Burke or Debrett, or by people who had never seen her, never known her;—but my dear,” opening her eyes to express significance,

"all *that* is nothing; you forget it, you laugh at it, it seems ridiculous and preposterous once you come into contact with Lady Matilda herself. You don't understand me, I see. Well, first, did Mr Challoner ever mention her?"

"Oh dear, yes." (She supposed he had; of course he had; she was sure he had; at any rate it did not signify whether he had or not.) "Oh, yes. He came here straight from Overton Hall in December, and he had been there for ever so long."

"He had indeed. Did he tell you how long?"

"Some weeks. A month, I think."

"Right, a month; a whole month. He was there all by himself. They do not have *many* visitors usually at that season, or indeed at any season; but when Mr Challoner was there they had *none*. They liked having him alone. Do you see?"

Yes, Mary saw. She smiled and saw,—was secretly diverted beyond measure at the speaker's eager and ominous significance, it was so ludicrous to see Juliet sitting forward on the very edge of her chair, with uplifted fingers and stammering tongue. She really was too odd, too amusing. Mary almost saw the scene in future travesties, given by herself for the benefit of an enraptured audience.

"Of course you know that nothing but kindness, nothing but duty impels me to—I am afraid you will be—may I go on?" continued Miss Appleby with the same impetuous swiftness. "Do you promise not to be angry, not to think me impertinent? No, I see you will not. You look so kind and gentle—and to be so confiding too,"—with a sigh—"how can Mr Challoner——?"

"——You have something to say about Mr Challoner?"

"Yes," said Juliet, with sudden energy—"yes, I have."

"And me?"



"And you, of course; it is you whom he is——, stop, let me prepare you. First, then, this Lady Matilda is very handsome."

"Is she?"

"And very clever."

"Oh!"

"And she does not disdain—oh, she does not at all disdain to let her bright eyes do a wayside mischief to any one. She is not above that, by any means. She is young too,—marvellously, absurdly young of her age. She does not look much older than you——"

"——Than me! Why, she is a married woman, and——"

"——Unmarried now, remember."

"Well, a widow, which is worse. And she must be thirty-five at least. Her daughter is eighteen, and has a baby: Jem is the baby's godfather——"

"——I know, I know; that baby is the jest of the neighbourhood. No one calls it Lotta's baby; it is always 'Lady Matilda's grandson.' We all think first of Lady Matilda in everything; and though it is her daughter who is my age—we were born in the same month of the same year—yet I do solemnly assure you it is Lotta's mother who in reality is my contemporary and your—rival."

"Good gracious, Miss Appleby!" It flashed through her visitor's mind that she had heard of the reason being at times affected after an illness of the kind Juliet had just gone through; and, far more alarmed by this supposition than affected by the purport of the breathless whisper, she hastily endeavoured to close the subject.

"I am sure I am very glad," she said, nervously. "It is so nice when people are like that. Thank you so much for telling me. And now I must not tire you," rising from her seat.

"You do not *yet* comprehend," exclaimed Juliet, with

a faint impatience. "I thought I had been tolerably plain, but I can make it plainer still if you like."

"Pray, don't. I really——" holding out her hand.

"No, no," cried Miss Appleby, putting it aside—"no; you positively must not go yet." Then, with a new light—"Have I offended you? Have I been too abrupt? Is that it?"

"Oh dear, no. I am not in the least offended. There has been nothing to offend me—nothing at all. But your nurse,"—looking round uneasily.

"No fears. I told her to leave us," replied the invalid, mistaking the glance. "If you are afraid of her listening,"—lower—"not that I believe she could hear if she tried,—but, however, sit down here,"—clearing away some trifles from a chair beside her,—"*here*,"—patting it authoritatively,—"*here*. Dear Miss Tufnell"—bending towards her—"I have wanted so much to tell you this. I knew all about it. I was there all the time it was going on——"

"It? What?"

"Mr Challoner and Lady Matilda. They behaved exactly as if they were lovers, they did indeed. Every one expected to hear of the engagement daily——"

"——To an old woman with a grown-up daughter!"

"——Each time I went up to the Hall,—and I was up most afternoons, for we are so intimate,—each time I thought I should have the news to tell on my return. It was evident that he worshipped her, and that she—she allowed it. He left everything—shooting, hunting, everything that she did not join in—for her sake. Wherever she was, there was he. Either they were riding, or walking, or reading poetry in the boudoir, or playing billiards——"

"Billiards? How nice!" Not a word of the above had Mary heard. Not a syllable of the impassioned arraignment had taken hold. "She really is more than

odd," Miss Tufnell was considering. "The idea of trying to make mischief between me and Jem! As if anybody could be jealous with poor Jem! And such a person as Lady Matilda Wilmot to set up as the one to be jealous of! Of course he had to be agreeable to a great lady, and this little meddlesome idiot to put her own stupid construction on it!"

She hoped Jem would take her herself to Overton Hall some day. It must be jolly there, as it had been jolly at Lady Fairleigh's, where there had been nothing but picnics and junketing all day and every day, and where Jem had always been seated next her. Jem evidently liked those kind of places better than he did Olinkton; he had, certainly he had been more cheerful in those days than later on; but why should she take umbrage at that? Billiards was the first word in all Miss Appleby's tirade which struck upon her ear as conveying any meaning.

"Jem is a good player, I believe," quoth his bride-elect, pleasantly.

"So good," replied Juliet, "that to see him playing against Lady Matilda—why, I can give her points and beat her; and as for Mr Challoner, it was a perfect farce to see him lying up for her ball to have an easy pocket, or putting it in line for a cannon."

"Very polite of Jem," observed Mary, laughing. "Jem always is polite."

"Then, her music. She does not play well, not really *well*,—you would never call her anything much of a performer; but he listens as if she were a Handel or a Mozart. He hears it whenever she strikes a note; let him be where he may, as sure as fate, the door opens and in he comes. And then he will hang over the piano,—it matters not who is there, he takes no notice of any one; he seems quite absorbed, half in listening, half in looking——"

"Jem is fond of music."

"Is Jem fond of long aimless country walks through muddy lanes? Does Jem like high unsheltered downs in driving rain? Will Jem sit for hours in cold caverns by the sea, when the wind is bellowing through them, and the waves are splashing into them, for the pleasure of the thing? It seemed to me that Mr Challoner had changed characters when I saw him here, so meekly dangling in and out of the shops of Clinkton. Yes, I saw him several times. He was rather grave, I thought. Rather grave, and a little, just a very little, depressed. I think he would have spoken even to poor me when he was here,—he would have spoken to any one almost; butter would scarcely have melted in his mouth. Oh, but he was more saucy at Overton Hall, I can tell you. He had his own way there; and there was no good little errand-boy, trotting about with parcels in the streets of Seaburgh; no dire and devout anxiety to make friends with everybody; no hanging head and dejected step——"

"Really, I wonder what all this is about!" cried Mary Tufnell all at once, for there was that in the speaker's tone which even she could ignore no longer. "Do you mean to blame us for taking Jem shopping? I suppose you think we ought not to have troubled him; but I assure you, if we had not got him out of doors somehow, he would have sat all day long over the fire——"

"——He never sat over the fire at Overton."

"We thought the air would do his headaches good——"

"——Oh, he had headaches? He never had headaches at Overton—

"——Clinkton may not suit him, you know. Mamma said she was sure it did not suit him, for he used to come down to breakfast looking tired out, and he never ate anything——"

"——Yet his appetite was good at Overton."

so we thought something must be done for

him," continued Mary, resolutely getting out her say, "and fresh air is always thought the best thing."

"Did you never propose country walks?"

"Oh, I hate country walks."

"And you don't ride or drive?"

"I drive sometimes. It is not much fun; and besides, I have always lots of things to do. I like the shops, and the streets, and meeting people, and hearing what is going on."

"And to this Mr Challoner never objected?"

"Never. He never objected to a thing. He always did whatever I liked, and always inquired what I liked first of all"—very emphatically.

"And when he was at Overton Hall, I suppose it was considered that he should always do as Lady Matilda Wilmot liked?" inquired Miss Appleby, with suggestive emphasis.

"Certainly. If she has the peculiar tastes you speak of, Jem is perfectly right to conform to them."

"One of her peculiar tastes is flirting. Is he right to conform to that also?"

"Oh yes, with a grandmother," said Mary, laughing, ("for," thought she, "who can tell how disagreeable this girl may make herself if she once thinks she has made an impression on me? I will not be angry unless I am obliged. I will turn it off with a jest as long as I possibly can.") "Really, Miss Appleby," the young lady continued, accordingly,—“really it is too funny; you can have no idea how funny it is. I beg your pardon, but you have misunderstood so completely, and the idea—when I think of Jem's long face gallivanting—Jem, who can never so much as make a pretty speech——”

“——Ah, can't he though? I have heard him——”

“——Not what I call a pretty speech. I have no doubt he pays a solemn compliment now and again to the beautiful Lady Matilda, but even that I can hardly

bring myself to see him attempting. What agonies it must occasion! What an effort it must be! Pray, if I may inquire as much, how does he do it? What does he say? What attitude does the unhappy wight assume? Is he on his knees? Or standing, and bowing with one hand upon his heart, 'Madam, your charms are not faded,'—'Madam, I am your most obedient'—— Ha! ha! ha! Well, you might have given him a younger lady at all events, if I am to be so very, very jealous of her," for Juliet had emitted a groan of impatience and despair, hopeless of success with an auditor so rooted in her preconception of the case.

"Oh, if I could but make you see!" she sighed.

"No, pray don't," responded the lively Mary, with fresh mirth; "pray don't, or I should die on the spot. I am quite willing to take it on credit. The dear old lady——"

"Old lady!" fumed Juliet. "Good gracious! did I not tell you she looks no older than you or I? And she *is* no older—I mean in what she does, and feels, and thinks. She may seem old to you, but she is some years Mr Challoner's junior, at all events,——" Mary laughed no more, this was a sore point,—"and living as she does with her brothers, and being made a pet of by them——oh dear, how poor Teddy did dote on her, and I can hardly yet believe he is gone! He was—was very fond of me, too. I don't know what might have happened if poor Teddy had lived, for I really liked him very much," looking down. "But," continued Miss Appleby, returning pertinaciously to the attack, for having gone so far it was absolutely imperative she should now go further,—she must prevent Challoner's success in matrimony as well as in love, it being her aim that he should have neither, and his disappearance from Overton had told nothing to any one, since his father's illness had covered it,—"but I must not go off to this. Dear Miss Tufnell,

once more, do, I implore you, *do* listen to me. I am to be depended on: I am only telling you what I saw with my own eyes."

"Your eyes must see better another time. When next you meet Mr Challoner, I trust it will be——" she hesitated,—“I trust that you will see him as——”

“——As the happy bridegroom,” sneered Miss Appleby.

“That’s it. As the happy bridegroom. Poor fellow, he ought to be happy then, for he has had a bad time first, and—and——”

“He is to be fully rewarded for it all by-and-by.”

“If I can reward him,” said Mary, simply. “I will do my best. He is much too good for me, but at least I know how to—to——”

“To value him? Yes?”

“I *do* know how to value him, Miss Appleby; and I think that at any rate—whatever you may imagine—whatever illusions you may have had—you ought to remember that I am now as good as Jem Challoner’s wife, and that I will not listen to——”

“——You are as good as his wife, and you will not listen to one who tells you—and who is ready to swear that every word she says is true—that this man who has deceived you and——”

“——He has *not* deceived me.”

“——Who pretends he loves you——”

“——He *does* love me.”

“That he is deeply and openly and shamelessly in love with another woman.”

But this was too much. The blood rushed to the brow of Challoner’s betrothed, and her eyes likewise caught fire, as she sprang to her feet with an exclamation: she could no longer attempt to turn aside the shaft of malice, she must dash it from the striker’s hand.

“You want me to believe *that*?” she cried; “you think you may say such things because—because I have tried

to be patient, and not to mind all the rest, and because Mr Challoner is not here to defend himself——”

“——Ah, my dear Miss Tufnell, I only wish he were here to defend himself,” said Juliet, in her turn gentle as a lamb, now that at length her companion was fairly roused. “Oh, Mary—let me call you ‘Mary,’ for I am so sorry for you—I do pity you from my heart,” attempting to take a hand, which, however, was not conceded. “I do not wonder that you are angry with me,” proceeded Juliet, plaintively; “indeed, as you do not believe I am speaking the truth, the wonder would be if you were not angry; but if I can convince you, if I can prove it——”

“Prove it. But you can’t.”

“Not yet. But if you will trust me, and do as I tell you, you would soon be able to prove it without my help.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Ask Mr Challoner himself.”

“If I wished to insult him, I should ask himself.”

“Ask her, then; ask Lady Matilda; write to Lady Matilda——”

“——Write to Lady Matilda! I write to Lady Matilda! Lady Matilda would think me crazy. And how should I do it—I who never wrote to a Lady Anybody in my life? I should not even know the proper address. No thank you,” cried Mary, with great resentment; “if you want to let me in for anything of that kind, you have come to the wrong person. I hope I know better than to make such a fool of myself. And as for Jem, I tell you plainly that I shall never mention the subject to him either; it would be a perfect disgrace to me if I did.”

“And you do not believe what I tell you?”

“Not a word.”



## CHAPTER XL.

## CHOOSING THE WORST.

' "A soul exasperated in ills, falls out  
With everything,—its friends, itself."

—ADDISON.

Like many people who have a taste for making fun of their neighbours, Mary Tufnell had a profound dislike to being made fun of in her turn.

It seemed to her now that even if Juliet Appleby during the past interview had been perfectly serious and sincere, and had not been off her head when laying such a preposterous charge at Jem Challoner's door, other people would find plenty in it to make merry over should it once get abroad.

Boys and girls in their teens are apt to think half-a-dozen years ahead a great age, while a dozen must certainly divest the unwedded he or she of any sort of possibilities or romantic interest; and to this rule the banker's pretty daughter was no exception. She allowed, indeed, that from some occult cause or other, she in her heyday at nineteen had not been proof against Challoner, who, as everybody full well knew, was on the wrong side of nine-and-thirty; but Jem, she said, was not like other people,—somehow you never thought of Jem's being old or young, and—and—she supposed it was all right. She liked Jem, and everybody knew how devoted *he* was to *her*; and her father and mother were pleased, and Herbert Mildmay joked her about turning into a great lady, and the girls of Clinkton hoped she would not be too fine to speak to them when she should take her place among the county families; and altogether poor Mary was well enough pleased with her prospects. But it must be owned that the one thing she disliked having allusion made to

was the disparity of years betwixt the pair ; and indeed her interview with Miss Appleby had been principally disagreeable to her from its having turned, so to speak, on this unfortunate theme.

She had felt both herself and her betrothed turned into ridicule.

The supposition that he, grave, reserved, and dignified, as he ever showed himself in her presence and in that of her family, should be secretly and unlawfully indulging in another passion, was to her mind not only wildly improbable, but grossly absurd.

He could not do it if he would—he would not if he could. On both grounds she felt herself more than safe.

It would be nothing short of shameful in her to suspect her acknowledged lover, to whom her troth had been pledged so openly, who had urged his suit so manfully, and who had never caused her a moment's uneasiness by so much as looking at another girl when she was by,—it would be perfectly atrocious in her or in any one of them to spy and pry when they had not only no grounds for supposing anything amiss, but when it was all the other way.

Had he ever shown himself backward? Had he ever slighted her, or neglected her, or given her cause for complaint in any way? Never.

Had he ever, little as he cared for raillery or *badinage*, tried to interfere with her amusing herself, laughing and jesting with the younger men, the Clinkton cousins and friends who were in and out of the banker's house as if it were their own—it being plainly understood that intercourse and intimacy ended there,—had Jem ever gloomed at any of them on Mary's account, or minded whom she sat next to, or talked to, or made much of? Not once. He had read a book peaceably in the corner, or gone out for a walk when the room was at its fullest and noisiest ; but so far from this having been the result of jealousy or

ill-humour, she had never heard a word of it afterwards, and he had been as kind as ever in the evening. He had not so much as inquired how long the visitors had stayed.

"I'm really afraid Mary will have it only too much her own way," Mary's delighted mother had observed once on an occasion of the sort. "To my mind, 'tis not the best thing for a girl of Mary's age to be allowed to follow her own whims in everything; but that's how 'twill be with a husband like Jem Challoner. Lor'! she may carry on as she pleases, and never a word, nor so much as a look from him. He makes believe not to see, that's what he does. He'll go and stand by the window, or fix his eyes on the fire or anywhere, not to seem to be a check upon the young people when they're getting too frolicky; and I declare my head's been fit to split sometimes with Mary's laugh—but Jem, he never finds fault with anything."

To have this little viper of a Juliet Appleby, now, making nasty sly insinuations against Jem himself! To have her setting up to know more about him than Mary, whose own possession he was! And as if to render the whole still more unpalatable, the silly thing had chosen as the object of poor Jem's suppressed ardour an elderly widow lady!

Not even a spinster—not even a miss. But a widow with a grown-up daughter, and that daughter herself a wife and a mother!

("And quite my age, if not more," muttered Miss Tufnell angrily to herself, as she stepped into the pony-carriage, "and there's a baby into the bargain. I do wonder at that girl's cheek. She wanted Jem for herself, I suppose. But to try to make out that he was smitten with a *grandmother*——")

"What do you say, Fanny?"

"I am dying to know what happened, dear!"

"Yes; well, we had a long talk, you know."

"Had you any idea how long? You were nearly an hour up-stairs. I thought you were never coming down again; but I suppose the precious secret was too engrossing. Ahem,—am I not to know anything about it? Just a little, a very little, won't you tell me?"

It was at this moment that Miss Preston's companion formed the resolution for which so many people in after-life had unwittingly cause to bless her.

With the speed of lightning there darted into Mary's mind the swift determination that not one syllable of what had passed in the little upper room at Windlass Court that day should ever transpire to the outer world.

Through her at least nothing should come out; and she shrewdly suspected, from the extreme anxiety shown by Juliet to win her belief and co-operation, that the whole fabrication would fall to the ground should she turn a resolutely cold shoulder upon it.

Fanny Preston accordingly implored in vain. No; Mary had really no report to give, no confidence to retail. Miss Appleby was a disappointing creature, and she was surprised that anybody should make an ado about her: after bringing them both out that long way and getting them into the scrape they were sure to be in on their arrival home, there had been no reward, nothing to go for. Juliet had maundered on about one thing and another, and when at last the mysterious communication had been got at, it had turned out such a childish piece of nonsense, that Mary vowed she would be ashamed to repeat it; and indeed she had solemnly assured Miss Appleby that it would not be repeated.

"For I am sure I hope she has had the grace to be ashamed of it herself by this time," concluded the speaker, tucking in the corner of the scarlet carriage-rug as she spoke. "When people have been ill one must be charitable, or else I'm sure I should say all sorts of unmerciful things of Miss Appleby to-day. You had by

far the best of it down-stairs by yourself, Fanny. I suppose you found a nice book or something; and what a delightful old library that was!" and she wandered away from Juliet and her secret.

"I shall get it out of her presently, however," concluded Fanny Preston, who was not in the least taken in, but who understood it would be better to say no more at the time.

And now, how shall we say it? Poor Mary Tufnell! Little did her friend think that the "presently" she so lightly promised herself was never to come: little did either of the two imagine that when they parted on the doorstep of Mary's home, parted laughing and nodding, reassuring one another as to the blame which neither greatly feared, promising each other many such another merry meeting,—little did either dream that their lips and hands had met for the last time.

Fanny looked back for a moment as she drove down the street. The grey figure with its trim fittings was still on the doorstep awaiting admittance; the bright sunshine fell full upon it; there was a gay gesture of farewell, and she had looked for the last time on Mary's face.

She was absent from Clinkton for a few days, and the first thing she heard on her return thither was that Mary Tufnell had taken the small-pox. How, when, and where taken was but too easily conjectured. Juliet Appleby could have put her finger on the moment—almost on the moment—when she gave the dread infection,—breathed it into her, hung it over her.

"I did forget," she sobbed in helpless penitence come too late, "when we grew engrossed with what we were talking about. I lost sight of everything else, and asked her to sit close to me, and took her hand, and—and whispered—oh, I shall never, *never* forgive myself,—never, never. Oh, why did I send for her? Why did

she come? I told the Prestons a lie too; I said I was allowed to see people, and Dr Bell had never said so; and when I heard she was there, I had to persuade the nurse to show her up. Now I have killed her!——”

And she had killed her.

It was soon begun, it was soon over. Lamentations and mourning, tears and agonies, were of no avail; there was a sickness, a sinking, a frightful fear, an anguish of discovery, a chill of despair, and all was at an end.

She was gone, and had made no sign.

Not a word, no whisper had ever escaped to taint the name of Challoner, or to show that what had passed on that fatal day at Windlass Court had done aught than glance harmlessly aside; and so penetrated was even the light mind of Juliet Appleby by sorrow and remorse, that never to the latest day of her life did she either allude to the interview. Her lips had been sealed in too awful a manner.

And Challoner, how did he feel? He had thought that nothing could ever cause him grief or happiness more.

Perhaps he was right so far. It was not sorrow, and God forbid it was anything else with which he heard the terrible intelligence. A dumb amazement, an awe-stricken self-reproach overwhelmed him. He almost reeled beneath the shock.

He was free, but free by an intervention not to be thought of without a shudder.

He had not stirred hand or foot to free himself. He had meant, in his own stupid, sad, heart-broken fashion, to do his best by Mary Tufnell, to tear out of his remembrance all that was past, to give to her the future, to—to—and behold! the ravelled skein had been all at once taken out of his hands, and nothing was left him.

All he had now to do was done. He had to enter the darkened house, and walk by the side of the chief mourner, and feel the old man's trembling fingers within

his arm, and have his cheek wetted by the mother's tear; and pale and stern, they thought him crushed beneath his load, and hung about him tenderly, and ministered to him affectionately.

Every touch was a stab, every endearment a torture. He told himself that they, the kind, the good, the true, had got a very traitor in their midst; and for every pang wherewith they credited Mary's lover, he suffered ten.

He knew not that he could have so suffered again.

“And dear Jem, what a pity that poor papa was never himself—never knew about you, and your sad loss, even at the last!”

These were the first words that greeted Challoner on his return to Paris.

“Poor papa died very quietly the night before last,” proceeded the speaker, Lady Fairleigh. “He began to grow worse almost immediately after you had started, and we saw at once how it was going to be. The doctors gave us no hope from the first; but I would not telegraph, as I knew you had enough to think about already, and you had promised to come back to us as soon as you could. He really suffered no pain;” and she gave an account of the last hours.

“But why did you think it a pity he never knew about—about me?” inquired her brother, after he had listened to a second repetition of the above. “I am glad he was spared the knowledge; it could have done no good, and would only have distressed him.”

“But it would—at least I am afraid it would—have been the better for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You see, Jem, when poor papa thought you were going to marry an heiress——”

“Oh, he has cut me off with a shilling, has he?”

“Not exactly that; there will be something, there will

certainly be *something*, but I fear it will not be very much—not what you would have had if——. You see I happened to be with him not long ago, at about the time your marriage was arranged, and he was very full of it, and of all that it would do for you. He seemed to think that it would free him—from providing for you as he should otherwise have done, and enable him to help Tom a little more; and you know poor Tom will need help with that large place to keep up, and all those children, and Eliza so expensively dressed,—I'm sure I often wonder how they get on as well as they do. So papa said he meant to get round Mr Tufnell, and tell him plainly that all the money must be on his side—I mean, with the exception of the legacy Aunt Bertha left you. You were not even to have your allowance continued, and I am afraid,” continued Lady Fairleigh, reluctantly —“I am afraid that papa actually did do as he projected, and altered his will in consequence. He never exactly told me what passed; and indeed I thought it best not to ask, for I own I did not like his doing it,—but I gathered that he was immensely pleased with his interview; he said more than once that ‘old Tufnell had behaved like a gentleman,’ and I know he went to Turner and Wilson the very next day.

“That was one reason, I must tell you,” proceeded the speaker, “why I was so anxious about your marriage coming off without delay. I could not understand why there should be any delay; and knowing that so much depended upon it, and the Tufnells behaving so handsomely—but, however,” and she sighed.

“Is that all?” said her brother, as if he had hardly heard a word.

“All! But, my dear Jem, don't you understand, there will really be nothing for you. You will even have less in future than you have already? You always had a wretched allowance,—but poor papa never could see that



a younger son could have anything to spend upon. And now even that will be stopped as soon as the will is read. The only thing I can think of now"—and she hesitated—"is if Tom and Will could be got to join——"

"Nothing of the sort. I wouldn't take it from them."

"Well, perhaps it would be better not, but you will always come to me when you can, and I'm sure if I had anything of my own——oh, dear me, if poor papa could only have lived to know,—it is so very sad, so very unfortunate——"

"——Pooh! it does not signify a brass farthing!" said her brother, turning away with a frown.

Perhaps you will think he had his own resources; you may imagine that he contemplated an attempt at a reconciliation with Lady Matilda Wilmot? He did nothing of the kind. Such an idea never occurred to him. He knew her now, and he began to know himself. He was simply reckless. All that made life dear, and all that made it dread, alike were gone. He was free to fling himself away if he chose.

And he thought he would so choose.

## CHAPTER XLI.

"WORDS DON'T COME WHEN THEY ARE WANTED."

"For words are weak, and ill to seek,  
When wanted fifty-fold."

—PHILIP VON ARTEVELDE.

"Challoner loves you, and Challoner is going to the devil!"

The speaker was Lord Overton, the listener was Matilda, and it was the first time that Challoner's name

had been mentioned between them since the never-to-be-forgotten day on which it had seemed to both that they had seen the last of him for ever.

For weal or for woe, never more would Jem Challoner voluntarily cross their path: they had done with him, he had done with them,—and with the bitterness of such a conviction, with all its accompaniments, had grown up a blank silence between the two, which had never until now been broken.

Challoner had been ignored—they would have said forgotten. They would have told you it was their brother for whom that void was kept; that their lost boy, in his feebleness, his helplessness, his wilfulness and waywardness, had made for himself a place in their hearts which could never be filled by another,—but in truth it could have been filled, more than filled, by one who had once seemed only too able and only too ready to take it.

Overton had liked Challoner, Matilda had loved him: in him could have been a new bond of union, deeper and tenderer even than that which had drawn them together in poor foolish Teddy,—and that link also was broken and gaping.

Now the two lived on and on—side by side, and yet asunder; there was no riding, no skating, no singing, no cheery notes floating through the dim old galleries,—but only a black-robed figure gliding alone and slowly down the long vistas of the park, or standing motionless and mute, watching from windows when there was nothing to watch for—and once it was the piece of ancient Moorish tapestry which drew that fixed and melancholy gaze upon itself; and it came into the mind of the elder brother ever and anon, as the months passed and no change was seen, that there was only one thing and only one person who had the power, and who might have yet the chance, of waking his sister from her mournful reveries.

He knew all about Challoner. He knew far more than Matilda did.

When on that night on which their house had been left desolate, she had thrown herself into his arms with, "Overton, dear Overton, I have no one but you now, and you have only me. Love me more than ever you did before, Overton; I need it so much more now: I have no one but you,—no one, no one but you!" he understood it all. Teddy had revealed his mission,—Matilda's sobs confirmed it.

Neither of them thought of Matilda's child, that self-satisfied self-absorbed Lotta, who could never be anything to her mother; and in pressing his wretched sister to his heart, and inwardly vowing to make up to her for all she had lost, so far as in him lay, the kind Overton felt in solemn truth that he alone was left, and that, try as he might, he was inadequate to the post thus forced upon him. "What will she ever do with only me?" pondered he sorrowfully. "How shall I ever satisfy a woman like Matilda? I never was clever—now I am dull. I have seen nothing of the world. I have not poor Teddy's spirits. I have none of his pleasantness, his aptitude for making the most of trifles, of finding amusement in everything or anything. Matilda is unhappy now, too unhappy to care; but by-and-by she will begin to pine. And then, must Lotta after all be the Countess of Overton? Must Robert Hanwell reign here as prince-consort when I am gone?"

Now if there was one person on earth for whom the good earl entertained real contempt, contempt active and positive, it was his niece's husband. "What business," he muttered to himself,—“what business had Robert to put that amount of crape upon his hat? What concern was it of his whether the stone on poor Teddy's grave was to be broad or high? Teddy gone, and Lotta Matilda's only child, it could not be a source of lasting grief to Lotta's husband that Matilda was Overton's heir."

But Overton himself groaned in spirit.

What a different picture fancy had drawn of this sweet summer time only eighteen months ago, when Jem Challoner was coming and going at the Hall! Then he had seen as in a vision Matilda again a wife, again a mother—and the thoughts of a little Jem toddling about the terrace, and of the long faces of the Hanwells, and of Lotta's jealousy and Teddy's pride, and of Challoner to walk with and to shoot with, and of the cheerful dinner-table, and everybody pleased, and Robert discomfited,—all had combined to make up a delicious medley, a prospect after his own heart. Alas when it had melted away as fairy cobwebs beneath the morning sun!

No Challoner, no Teddy any more, and he fancied a settled exultation in Mr Hanwell's demeanour, and an increased importance in his step from the date of the collapse. His aversion increased in due proportion, he grew almost to hate Robert, and thought of the guilty Challoner with a tenderness of which he ought to have been ashamed.

No doubt Challoner had behaved badly, no doubt dishonourably, treacherously, but——. And then he heard that Challoner was bereft of his bride, straitened in his means, and at variance with his family. His soul yearned over him. It was when the last piece of news came through Robert Hanwell, and came direct from headquarters, stamped with Whewell's authority, and professing to be Whewell's experience, that Overton felt the time to speak had come.

It was an August evening, and beneath the summer sun field after field of long-eared wheat whistled softly from very weight of fulness, and the poppies flared by the wayside, and the landrail's note sounded up and down over all the land.

Matilda, weary and languid as she often was now, had retired to the cool shades of the great back drawing-room,

a room little sat in at any time, and which had never once been used since Teddy's death,—and there she stood looking absently from the window as was her wont, when the door opened, and to her surprise it was her brother who had followed her.

Now what did this portend? She had left the good man to all appearance nodding in his easy-chair after dinner—what ailed him that he could not stay there? He thought she was lonely, she supposed.

“No, my dear Overton,” quoth the lady to herself; “no, I am not lonely, not in the way you imagine. I—to confess the truth—I thought I did very well without company for the present; my own company is quite enough for me, almost too much for me on these days. I am best left to it; I am indeed. However, not to be ungracious——”

“Well, sir,” addressing the intruder with a spark of her old playfulness; “well? What has brought you here? Tired of yourself? Or bitten by the midges? Or what? Wasps?”

“I came to find you,” replied he; and as he spoke, he walked up from behind quite close to where she stood, and put his two hands on her shoulders.

“To find me!” cried Matilda, surprised both at the tone and action. “Had you any particular reason for wishing to find me? I have been with you all day——”

“And I have tried to speak to you all day. But,” said Overton, looking straight out over her shoulder,—“but words don't come when they are wanted.”

“I hope it is nothing disagreeable?” said Matilda, lightly.

“I hope you will not think it so.”

“Robert?”

“No.”

“Lotta?”

“No. It is about one who was once your friend and

mine," continued Lord Overton, after a very long silence, during which Matilda's heart had suddenly begun to beat against her side, and her breath to come quick and short. "Dear Matilda, I have something to say, and I have also something to ask. You know that I have never adverted to Challoner, never mentioned his name since he left us; I have never inquired what passed between him and you on that dreadful day. I knew that poor Teddy had told you what he told me; and I knew—for I was at pains to find out—that he had spoken the truth. It was very sad," he paused.

"*Well?*" said Matilda, in a hard dry tone.

"But——" he stopped again.

"I don't know why we need enter upon it, brother. Mr Challoner will not trouble either of us any more."

"I know he was to blame," began Overton, heavily. "I am not exonerating him——"

"Good heavens! I should hope not."

"But consider—— Matilda, do you know the circumstances in which he was placed?"

"Oh, I know them; I know them, of course. They were not particularly creditable——"

"But are you sure that you *do* know——"

"Pshaw! I know this: I know that while he had asked another woman to be his wife—that while he had plighted his troth to her, and held hers, he dared to ask for *my* love—mine. Ah! you exclaim. You did not suppose he had gone so far as that, did you? No, and no more he had—happily no more he had—until after, just after I had learned the miserable truth. Think what it would have been if he had tried me sooner. I loved him—you know I loved him; and had he asked me——" and she hid her face in her hands.

"My poor girl!"

"He was out of himself, don't you see?" said Matilda, presently. "He was aroused out of his caution by fears

that he had killed me, and he spoke out what he had never dared, had never *dared* to say before."

"And you told him then that you knew?"

She bent her head.

"And you parted—how did you part?"

"You may tell yourself that," said she, with a curve of her proud lip.

"Did it ever occur to you," said Overton, after a time, "to suppose that even a man who behaves ill——?"

"——Behaves ill! Dear Overton, do not drive me frantic with your calmness and moderation. Behaves ill! And he was false, cruel, treacherous——"

"——I don't believe he was one of 'em," said Lord Overton, bluntly.

It was the last thing he should have said. It pricked the bursting heart to the quick, and the torrent that now poured forth seemed as though it could never cease, never be quenched.

"And now is my turn," said he at last. "Now, my poor little sister, you have had your say, listen to me. Challoner was sorely tempted. He was let in for a marriage in haste, which he repented of at leisure, and I presume he always hoped it would come to an end of itself——"

"——You have no right to say that."

"I have, for it is the truth. Do you imagine I would put forth such a statement without good foundation for it? Now listen. He was thus engaged, and thus repenting, when he fell in with you. He loved you——"

"Loved me with what sort of love?"

"Loved you against his will, against his honour, and against his conscience. I believe in such love," said Lord Overton, simply.

"Believe in it?" gasped she.

"Believe in it as a reality, as a *real* and *actual* thing; as a power which might—— See, Matilda, try to follow

me. Matilda, Challoner is not a very young man to be caught by a pretty face; and, as I understand, it was not a pretty face that did so catch him. Probably he wished to have a home of his own, and this young lady who—who was well endowed, and who was looked out for him,—my dear, I *know* that it was so——”

“——I don't see that it matters.”

“It does matter, in a way. It was not a case of caprice, or fickleness, on Challoner's part: she never had his heart, I am fully convinced; and then he came here, and saw his mistake. I may be wrong in this, but my belief is that he never fully understood what he had done until——” he paused.

“Well?”

“Until he knew you.”

“He ought never to have known me. He ought never to have got to know me. He ought to have gone away——”

“And did he not try to go away?”

“Never—after the first.”

“He was caught, then,” said Overton, with a grim smile. “Yes—you, Matilda, you caught him. Stop—I don't say intentionally; for we can all remember”—still smiling—“how badly, how abominably you treated him on that first evening they dined here—Whewell and he,—but I think you contrived to do away with that ill impression tolerably soon afterwards, did you not?”

“Not until he——”

“Not until he led the way? Perhaps. And perhaps the ill impression never existed; for I fancied, although I never said so, that the mischief had begun before any of the rest of you, before even Challoner himself, suspected it.”

“Suppose it had—suppose it had,” tapping the floor with her foot, “there was time enough. I had given *him* no thought then, at any rate.”



"True. And no doubt he should not have given a second thought to you. I wonder," said Lord Overton, musing—"I wonder if he could have helped it."

"Overton!"

"Well?"

"*Of course* he could have helped it. Would you have behaved so?"

"I have never been tried."

"Would any man of honour?"

"Oh, lots."

"I do not say they would have come back the second time, Matilda, as Challoner did," pursued the speaker, "nor do I say that he did not very weakly and——"

"——And wickedly——"

"And wickedly, perhaps, give way to his feelings; but I do say that the feeling itself which he entertained for you was true, pure, and genuine—also, that it was very strong, and overmastered him. Any one could see that."

"Well, well," rejoined Matilda, impatiently; "let it be so. What is it to either of us now? The thing is past and done——"

"But now he is free."

"Free? Well, free; what does that signify to us, either?"

"I want you to forgive him, dear."

"That I shall never do."

Then there was a long pause, and Overton was the first to break it.

"He is very miserable," he said.

No reply.

"I am afraid, from what I hear, he is—worse."

"And yet I am to forgive him?"

"And yet you are to forgive and to save him."

"That is nonsense, Overton, if you mean—I know the sort of thing you mean. Oh, I'll forgive him—forgive him if you like—but let it end there. People can't have

everything. Mr Challoner had his choice once, and he threw away the substance for the shadow, like the dog in the fable."

"Matilda, Matilda, how hard you are! You were not so hard once. You were all tenderness and pity for that poor boy who is gone. How you bore with him, pleaded for him, excused him! You would never see his vices——"

"Don't call them that."

"I must call them what they were," he said, sternly. "You, who stand out for truth, can't give the same thing different names for different people. Poor Teddy was not altogether responsible, it is true; but he had sense enough to be bad, and bad he would have been—and was—but for you. You reclaimed him. You made an entire change in him. I may say I hope, by God's mercy, you saved him. Will you never try what you can do with—another?"

"How can I?"

But he thought his words had told.

"There is but one way, indeed," he said, softly. "Forget the past, believe in the future; take him as he is, with all his faults, with all his sins,—take him and bid him sin no more. Matilda, I feel a solemn certainty that he would obey you. I have a faith in Challoner that refuses to be shaken. Stay," arresting her as she would have spoken; "stay—I know what you would say; but *I* say it might, it could, it ought to be done. You are the person who must do it,—you alone can rescue Challoner from the course on which I fear he has entered. He is not naturally depraved. He has no bias towards evil. Far from it,—all his desires and inclinations are on the side of right, and he has a disposition to all that is great and noble. You yourself, Matilda, have observed this; you thought him——"

"——Oh, what did I not think him!" cried she, bitterly.

"And do you not now see," pursued her brother, "that those very aspirations must have been against him, must have stood in his way, when he contrasted you with—God forgive me if I do her injustice—with that poor young lady to whom he was bound? I have heard from several that she was a light-minded frivolous girl, and that it had often been wondered at how one of her shallow pretensions could have satisfied a man like Challoner. Those who made the remark knew nothing of the circumstances of the engagement naturally, but the better informed made no secret of their persuasion that the match was entirely of Lady Fairleigh's making, and could never have answered. You look as if you would ask how I have learned all this? It has been a work of time. I have sifted into the worth of every piece of information I have received,—and it was really extraordinary from what unexpected quarters the information sometimes came,—but I would not mention it to you till I had made sure that it was no Will-o'-the-wisp that was leading me on. It was only yesterday that the last authentic account of Challoner himself reached me,—Challoner, as his friends—or so they call themselves—now assert him to be——"

"And what do they assert him to be?"

"Miserably poor, obstinately reckless, wild, mad, lost. Mind this is what *they* say, not what *we* need believe. That there is some truth in it, I fear is but too likely; but the charges were not of a nature,—in short, you may trust me, my dear sister, Challoner is not irreclaimable; one pure spot in his heart still attests to the impression made by you."

"What else did you hear?" she said, very low.

"He persists in refusing to take anything from the Tufnells, who are anxious to settle on him some of the portion he would have had with their daughter. His brothers and sisters have quarrelled with him, because he will not be provided for again in the way Lady Fairleigh

approves; he will court no second heiress. His friends find him bad company, and go where it is merrier. He is no credit to any one. I could tell you more, and will by-and-by, — but what I want now is that you should feel—— Matilda, now is the time to hold out a hand to a drowning man. Your hand——”

“——It is not strong enough.”

“It is—it is. It is the only hand that *is* strong enough. Matilda, you are born to lead, to attract, to control men, — women too, but more especially men. They cannot but admire you, they are impelled to follow you. Unconsciously you sway them to and fro, while your mind, naturally strong and self-reliant, is uninfluenced except when reason and judgment approve.”

She shook her head, but he continued. “I have known you from infancy, and no one so well as I knows that this is the truth. Look at our poor Teddy. It was wonderful the reformation your patient working wrought in him. You could do with him whatever you would—as a rule; of course there were times when he passed beyond your reach, but that was his unhappy infirmity,—in general he was yours to mould to your will. How he clung to you, how he loved you, and—how he feared you! I am your subject too, my dear—your very loyal and most submissive subject; and as for Challoner, he worshipped the very ground you trod upon.”

“And yet he duped, deceived, betrayed me,” cried she, trembling.

“True, but he loved you. When a man like Challoner marries a good woman——”

“Good women should not marry bad men.”

“Women like you should. You are a noble, resolute, reasonable creature, not a newly hatched miss just out of her teens, weak, yielding, amiable——”

“Ha! ha! ha!”

“My dear Matilda!”

She was laughing, but not hysterically, as he feared, though it may have been and probably was because of quivering on the brink of tears that the laugh came—but all the same it was spontaneous, it was like herself.

“Ha! ha! ha! So I am not amiable; weak and yielding, I have never pretended to be—but amiable? Oh, my dear Overton, it will take all your wits to fumble out of that hole.”

“It is not a question of wits,” said her brother, quietly. “I have put the case before you, badly I suppose, but still so that you can understand it. You know what I mean, and I think that between us two, it matters very little how I express myself. Challoner loves you, and Challoner is going to the devil! I ask you now, Will you save him, or not?” And without another word, he instantly left the room.

## CHAPTER XLII.

“CAN I WISH HIM TO LIFT HIS EYES TO YOU?”

“Silence in love bewrays more woe  
Than words, however witty.  
A beggar that is dumb, you know,  
May challenge double pity.”

—SIR W. RALFIGH.

It was not for several days after this that Lord Overton again accosted his sister on the subject which occupied both their thoughts. In the interim they studiously brought forward by turns other topics for discussion, and were laboriously interested in the weather, the harvest, their neighbours, or anything that was going on in the village; but at length came an opportunity, and Matilda knew by her brother's smile that he was going to make it one.

"Well?" he said. "Well?"

But she only turned away.

Then he let a week go by, and watched closely to see if there were any signs of improvement. He thought there were,—fancied he detected an increase of animation and alertness, and too hastily endeavoured to reap the fruit whereof these were the seeds.

Matilda only shook her head, and bade him, with a sigh, desist. It was no good; she could not see things as he did. She was sorry, but she could not help herself; she must go her own way.

But all at once, and that without a breath of preparation, the scene changed.

His sister had been over at Endhill—that going over to Endhill had become more of a duty than ever of late, there was so seldom anything to make the visit a reward for the exertion, and as a rule there was nothing to relate about it afterwards—and it was accordingly with the utmost surprise that on the occasion above alluded to he learned that Endhill had at last come to the front, and that while he at home was at a loss for any new argument or representation wherewith to assail deaf ears, Endhill had in point of fact done his work, and done it with success.

An angry brightness sparkled in his sister's dark eye, the colour went and came in her cheek, and her voice in vain sought to steady itself as she laid a hand on his arm—a weak, imperative, clinging hand. "Overton," she said—"Overton——"

"——What is it, my dear?"

"Send for him. You may. I give you leave. I——," and she burst into tears.

"What is it?" exclaimed he, dumfounded. "What has happened? Don't cry, Matilda. Here, sit down. There now, tell me about it. What is the meaning of all this?"

"It was they—Robert and Lotta," sobbed she. "They began about him. I never thought they would have done that, when they knew, oh, they knew enough to have kept them quiet, knew at least it could not have been very—very pleasant to—to me to hear his name, and still less as—as they spoke it. How do you think they did speak of him? Of Robert's friend, remember,—of the man whom they themselves brought here and introduced to us, dear baby's godfather, and—and all,—they spoke as if he were a dissolute abandoned wretch! They had the—the presumption to 'think it fortunate he had left off coming to see us,' and to be glad that they had broken with him too. With *him*—a man they are not fit to—the wonder was he ever deigned to enter Robert's house. And now Lotta, Lotta," said Lotta's mother, dashing away her tears and raising her face,— "Lotta, with her most virtuous air, 'will never think of taking any notice of Mr Challoner again!' Lotta! Fancy it, Overton!—*Lotta* take notice of *him*!"

"—Ah," murmured Overton, dreamily, "what a nice fellow he was! Never in the way; never said the wrong thing; never bothered. If there was a man in the whole world I would have chosen to spend my life with, it was Challoner."

"But Robert 'feels it only due to himself' to cut his friend dead in the street should he meet him now!"

"Ah!"

"Robert is quite concerned that you and I should have owed such an acquaintance to him. He hopes that we both understand it is only of late that Mr Challoner has so deteriorated. He was quite respectable—at least Robert believes he was quite respectable—when he came first to Endhill, otherwise he should never have been invited; but he has heard such an account of him lately from Mr Whewell—Whewell, mark you—that it has quite put any future intimacy between them out of the

question. What do you suppose all this was for, Overton? Was it because they were afraid of me? Then they *shall* be afraid of me. Overton, bring him back, bring him back. We are not too immaculate to touch him, are we, Overton? Thank God, you are no Pharisee, Overton. You would not cast away a poor forsaken soul,—oh no, you would seek him out and take him by the hand, and open to him your doors, and give him your all,” weeping afresh. “Oh, brother, it was Christ Himself who spoke through you to me the other night. I heard His voice—the Good Shepherd pleading for His lost one—but I stopped my ears and hardened my heart, for my foolish pride stormed up in arms at the remembrance of its wound. I wanted to listen to you, but it seemed as if I could not. I loved you for speaking, but something kept me back; and whenever I felt as if I wanted to yield, so surely as I gave way a little, there came across me some remembrance, some sore spot smarted anew. I could see his face and hear his eager cry, and then my own scorn, which I had vowed should never be recalled. Overton—I am so tired——” And she suddenly dropped into a seat, for she had risen in the excitement of the moment.

“Tired with the struggle,” said he, tenderly. “Give it up, Matilda. Think no more of the injury to yourself.”

“Yes; that is what I have been doing,” she replied in broken accents. “And yet how slight was the wrong to me, compared with what it was to that poor girl in her grave! God be thanked, she cannot be injured, or grieved, or distressed by either of us any more. Oh, I may do it now; I need not fear to do it now. If I can save him——”

“You can,” said Overton, with the authority of calm conviction. “Do not doubt it. There never yet was a sacrifice God did not bless——”

“But it is no sacrifice,” murmured she.



"It is a noble deed, a righteous, glorious, holy enterprise. I was wrong to use the word 'sacrifice,'" said her brother; "had it been a sacrifice, I should have doubted—indeed I should never have desired it; it is only by his possessing your whole, your entire affection—nay, don't be ashamed of it, my dear sister—it is to this I look for your happiness as well as his. You could do nothing unless you loved him as he loves you. God bless you, my dear, and give you strength and courage." He laid his hand on hers, pressed it, rose from her side, and presently went away.

"Now, how will he set about it?" whispered she to herself thereafter.

Perhaps, with her knowledge of Overton's tendencies and habits, it was not to be wondered at that she should experience some anxiety on this head. Balaam's ass—she stopped to laugh and scold herself for the shameful allusion; but still, — Balaam's ass had undoubtedly spoken words of wisdom, such as had never before astonished the ears of any living being at Overton Hall. Had she not been so overpowered and engrossed, she must have been struck with the strangeness of the thing; but, like the prophet, the purport of the speech had diverted her attention from the speaker, and it was only on reflection that she had time to consider whether her good brother's newly acquired judgment and discrimination would carry him on to the end of the chapter.

Few of the quicksands of life had ever come in Overton's way, and amidst these few he had invariably had to be taught how to steer. Now, could he take the helm into his own hands? But if not, what was to be done? for there was assuredly no one else.

And suppose he had already started on the wrong track? Suppose he had taken for granted, on insufficient grounds, that Challoner still cared for herself? He had said not, but was he to be trusted on this point? Sup-

pose Challoner had ceased to desire a reconciliation? Suppose he had even some one else?

It would be too dreadful if anything were now to go amiss; if she were to be shown to have humiliated herself in vain—met a man half-way who had no intention of meeting at all.

Nay, why should anything be advanced on her side? She was willing to forgive; but should she not at least be sued for forgiveness? She would suffer herself to be approached; but some desire to approach ought surely to be evinced. Disturbed and uneasy afresh, she longed that Overton should speak again, and wondered, when several days again elapsed, and he made no sign.

It was not to be borne longer.

"Are—are you going to do anything?" she asked.

"Certainly, I am. You gave me permission."

"But when?"

"At once. I have only been making sure of where he is."

"Where is he?"

"In little poky rooms in a back street. He is too poor now to afford his old lodgings in the Albany——"

"——That accounts for Robert and Lotta."

"And think of it, Matilda, in this broiling August weather. London in August! and lodgings in a back street in London!"

And involuntarily he looked round on the beautiful flower-beds, the lawns, the grassy parks, and great shaded avenues of Overton. They were together in Matilda's bower, and even that cool and chosen spot was scarcely bearable in the fierce sunshine that blazed overhead.

"London must be like the infernal regions," said Overton. Then he added slowly—

"I am going there to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" exclaimed she, with a start.

"To-morrow. Yes, I have settled to go up to-morrow.

There is nothing to keep me now. I got the correct address this morning. He has taken his name off all his old clubs. I daresay he can't pay the subscription; but he is to be found at a cheap little place, newly started, and there I shall look in upon him about luncheon-time. If he is out, I shall either wait, or go again."

"What will you say to him?"

"You must leave that to me, my dear."

"Dear Overton, you will not——"

"——Not what?"

"Not—bungle."

"I daresay I shall," said Overton, laughing. "I have very little doubt I shall bungle horribly, but that cannot be helped. I cannot well have you prompting at my elbow——"

"——Oh, don't jest."

"You may coach me beforehand, if you like, however. I will try to remember anything very particular if you din it into me. But I warn you, I fancy I shall do best let alone. I know what I have got to do. I have got to bring him back——"

"——But, dear Overton, be sure, do be sure, first, that he wants to come. Oh, don't," cried Matilda, clasping her hands in an agony of earnestness—"don't show *too soon*! Just think if it should not be as we suppose! If he does not wish to—to——"

"——You are not half so loyal to him as I am, Matilda. I would stake half my estates that Challoner is true to you."

"Do you call it being 'true' to me? Well, I will not quarrel for a word. Only if you are so sure, so very sure, dear Overton, just keep back your confidence from showing itself too quickly. Pretend a little for my sake. See," cried she, with imploring countenance—"see that it comes from him, not from you. Oh, he can speak when he pleases. He is not so diffident as you think; he could be bold enough once——"

"Do you mean that he is likely to come forward as a suitor for your hand now——now that he is——"

"But you would not offer it to him unless he does?"

"Now, Matilda, be reasonable. Is it likely that I should offer your hand to any man alive? Is it probable that I would lower you in the eyes of one whom I would have look up to you as to an angel? But at the same time, can I expect——can I ever wish that Challoner should lift his eyes to you at all, unless I show him that old scores are to be clean wiped out between us, and that he may be again what he was before——our friend?"

Matilda made no remark.

"As a friend——merely as a friend——I shall ask him here. If he refuses to come——as I expect he will refuse——it will rest with me to discover the motive. Trust me for once, my dear sister," concluded he, "not because I am the fittest person to act for you, but because I am the only one. I will not betray you. If I fail——but cheer up, my heart tells me that I shall not fail. To-morrow morning I go to town to fetch Challoner, and to-morrow evening sees him here."

## CHAPTER XLIII.

### CHALLONER FOUND.

"A voice from out the future cries,  
On, on—but o'er the past,  
(Dim gulf,) my spirit hovering lies,  
Mute, motionless, aghast."

—EDGAR ALLAN POE.

London out of the season, London abandoned to people who cannot get away, to schools let loose, to homeless cats, to all that is vagrant, shabby, and unsightly, is per-

## THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER.

as little tempting a spot and as great a contrast to London in the glory of the early spring and summer, as can be imagined.

To Jem Challoner it was misery absolute and unmitigated. All his companions and associates had gone their several ways, the long continuance of the hot weather having driven them one after another earlier than usual to more favoured haunts; but though one had his yacht, another his moor—though all had flitted off somewhere or other out of sight, it mattered not where, he had not so far followed their example.

In truth, he had nowhere to go; that is to say, there was nowhere he cared to go.

He had not indeed been exactly forbidden the homes of his brothers and sisters, as Whewell had insinuated, but neither had he been tempted thither by any desire on his own part, or any inordinate amount of pressing on theirs. His brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law were not, as a rule, to his mind: they were formal people with fixed ideas; and amongst them the notion was that Jem was not much of a family man; he did not care to linger among the women of his own set, and he could not be always among the men, who, indeed, though some of them were his own kin, were of another stamp to himself. He had ever been unlike the rest,—unlike Tom, who was so demure and prudent; Will, whose selfishness was so cleverly veiled; and Neddy, who was such a boor,—Jem had been unlike them all, and had looked down upon them all. It was now their turn to look askance upon him; and so the ladies, their good wives, soon let him discover. For, considered they, it would have been too tiresome to have had a whole bedroom stopped up, and a place at the table, and seat in the carriage always pre-engaged; moreover, to have had to arrange for a shooting man to shoot, and a smoking man to sit up late, and a dozen other things which must have been

done, once the bachelor brother were given the run of the house.

The husbands themselves, perhaps, were not urgent. Jem was a dull companion at this time, and there was not much change to be got out of him on any score. His long face at meals was not conducive to a good digestion; and why the deuce couldn't he play the amiable and trot hither and thither with the girls and children afterwards, instead of lounging about doing nothing from morning to night?

Challoner was not in a mood for children and frolicking,—and that was the truth. He was heavy-hearted, preoccupied, down in his luck, unable for any exertion, and indisposed for any amusement. The only prospect that found any favour in his eyes was that of going to some place where he had never been before, and among people he had never known in other days. An invitation which promised both these requisites had been half promised ere the season broke up; and on it his hopes now hung with a concentration and tenacity which was piteous. A friend, with a breezy Scottish moor, had “hoped to see him by-and-by, when he had seen his lodge and its accommodation, and would write so soon as he should be making up his party.”

But day after day passed, and no letter came.

He looked over his guns, and polished them; he ordered shooting-boots; he had his portmanteau-strap mended; and then he walked and walked about the dreary streets, among rows and rows of closed and papered windows, passed beneath the painters' ladders on the pavements, saw the maids gossiping from their mistresses' windows, saw their sweethearts boldly scale the front doors, and grew to hate the sultry and fetid place more and more every day.

At length a glorious morning—glorious even in London—tempted him to take his dog earlier than usual for his daily splash in the Serpentine,—his hour for this, the

chief event of the day, being usually six o'clock or so ; but the dog was restless, and the day was utterly vacant ; he thought he would break through the rule—go in the morning, and return to lunch at his club,—the poor little club which Overton had mentioned as the only one Challoner could now afford to belong to. In front of it, whom should he now behold but Lord Overton himself !

“Overton, I thought it must be you,” he said—for a meeting could not be avoided, and it must be borne in mind that there had been no open split between the two, and that Teddy's fatal accident, and old Mr Challoner's demise following so shortly upon it, might be supposed to account fully for their having drifted apart of late,—“Overton, I—what a time it is since—come in and have some luncheon. Were you looking for me ?”

“I had only just come. Yes, thanks, I'll have some luncheon. They told me you would be in about now,” replied Overton, in the same ordinary everyday tone. “Hot, isn't it ? You have been out early ?”

“Been to give my dog a dip.”

Then they sat down, and luncheon was ordered. Luncheon was ordered, brought, eaten, and drunk, and no pause was suffered to lift its awkward head into the conversation ; to all appearance the pair who sat chatting thus socially and uninterruptedly, partaking of their little meal across the little table—neither had much appetite, but that might have passed,—to the outward eye the two were pleased to meet, and found plenty of agreeable topics wherewith to chase the flying minutes,—and no one would have guessed that the one was talking against time, and the other against memory.

“I have not very long to wait,” said Lord Overton, at last. “Thanks, no, I won't smoke. I'll just——” rising and looking round. “It is quiet over there ; if you don't mind, we'll just go over,” moving across the large room to a distant recess ; “we shall be undisturbed there, and I

want to see you by yourself for a moment ;" he took out his watch.

Challoner stood mute by his side.

"Yes, I see I have more time than I thought," continued the speaker. "I thought it had been later."

"What is it you want to do?"

"It—well—ahem! Have you any engagement for this afternoon?"

"None whatever."

"For to-morrow? For this week?"

"N—no; not that I know of. I am expecting letters; I may be off any day, but—no, I have nothing fixed. What is it? Anything I can do for you?"

"Challoner," said his friend abruptly, "I want you to go back with me."

It cannot be said that the proposal was altogether unexpected, for so well had the part of ignorance and innocence been sustained, that even although Overton might be presumed to know more than he chose to reveal, it still remained dubious to what extent his knowledge went. Accordingly, in view of a hospitable offer, Challoner had prepared himself, and was now capable, without much effort, of putting forth the regrets and excuses which he had been able to think of. He was not really free, he said; he was awaiting another summons, had half-agreed, and feared it would hardly be the thing to draw back and throw his friends over.

"Yes, I understand," said Overton, quietly. "These are all very good excuses, quite sufficient excuses; but, old fellow, is there any *one*, any *other*, any *real reason*? Don't answer me if you would rather not, you know; still—I wish you would."

"I will," said Challoner, his own tone changing also. "I will, Overton, if you wish it. There *is*."

"My sister?"

"Your sister."



"I know something of what passed between you and her," rejoined Overton, readily; "but that *has* passed—it belongs to the past. Can you let it remain so? Bury it with the things that are forgotten, and come and see her and me as friends,—nothing more,—friends who will be glad to receive you, and from whom you need fear no—no—— in short, we are ready to forgive and forget, Challoner. Come, we want to be friends with you; can you and will you as frankly be friends with us?"

"No," said Challoner, looking out of the window; "no—I—cannot."

"Why not?"

"Because—— Why not? Because I cannot; that's all."

"At least say why."

"No, Overton; no, I can't say why. Don't ask me."

"Is it the past that prevents it?"

"The past? Ye—es. Partly."

"Only partly?"

"Overton, since you *will* have it, the past is nothing; it's the future I am afraid of. You are very good—far, far too good to offer me your friendship. Don't be hard on me that I cannot accept it,—at least I will not do you that wrong. I——" he drew in his under lip with a long dry breath, and bit it.

"Go on," said Overton, waiting.

"How can I go on? You know what it was—the old story. And though it may be past—past with you, past with her, it is *not* past, it never will be past with me. It—it would be again, and again, and again to the end of my life. I could not trust myself. The very sight of

"Oh!"

Challoner had turned away his face, but it had already betrayed enough.

"Now," he said, between his teeth—"now you see why I dare not come."

"You are afraid it would begin all over again?"

"Begin!" ejaculated Challoner, with a short laugh. "Begin! Look here, Overton; there would never be anything to begin, for it has never ended, and never will end. I love your sister as madly now, heaven help me! as I ever did,—and so I shall love her to the end of time. I have never ceased to think of her, and I never shall cease. I am too old," with a bitter smile. Then a break. Then he began again. "There—say no more. You were always kind. Give me your hand if you can, and don't, please, ask me to your house again. Thanks, I understand," holding the hand hard down for a moment, and again turning away his face.

"Challoner," said Overton, "I thought as much."

"You thought as much? And still——"

"And still I came; that was why I came. Do you see now? But don't mistake, I have no right to lead you to suppose—at least, I have no message,—that is to say, Matilda is just what she was, what she always was, only—only I can't bear to see her,—and we have lost Teddy,—and we are very lonely, she and I,—and—and,—so you just come back with me," he broke off suddenly.

"Overton," said Challoner, after a long silence, during which he had been choking down emotions which were almost too much for him,—“Overton, if I were not such a—a——. Confound it! I ought to have *something* to say. It's—too—much——”

"And now we understand each other," rejoined Overton, cheerily, "and we have only twenty minutes to spare. Shall we have a hansom? Or shall I stop here, while you run over to your rooms? Don't stop to pack. Tell them to send your portmanteau down by a later train. Tell them to send everything, mind: you won't be back in a hurry. I say, don't be long. We ought to be at the station by 3.30."

## CHAPTER XLIV.

"IS IT POSSIBLE?"

. . . . "Thy voice is as the tone  
Of my heart's echo; and I think I hear  
That thou yet lov'st me."

—SHELLEY.

Lady Matilda sat by the sea, beneath an overhanging cliff, whose face was spread with ivy, and whose brow was shaded by the thickest foliage.

It was her favourite seat: she had a rustic bench constructed there; and Challoner knew the way to the place.

Thither she had betaken herself as the time drew near when her brother might be expected to return. The cooler air from the water beneath was grateful to her burning brow; and the silence of its placid breath—for not a ripple broke upon the shore—soothed her restless, agitated brain.

Now that the step had actually been taken, that Overton had gone beyond recall, and that she had every reason to suppose a meeting had taken place,—for indeed they might be looked for at any minute—the dogcart had gone to meet the train half an hour before,—Matilda was nearly beside herself with suspense, anxiety, and something very like shame.

"Oh, how I wish he had not gone!" she now cried, with fretful sighs and groans; "I should never have let him go. Some other plan might have been thought of. It was my fault—my doing; I hurried him, I encouraged him, or else he would have taken a second thought himself, and waited. Now he will have seen his mistake. I shall have him coming back alone, I know I shall; and it will be so dreadful—so dreadful for us both. I am glad I am here; at least, I am not sitting up in state in

the drawing-room as if I expected anybody. It will be easier to hear what he has to say if he finds me casually here: he knows where to look. Hark!"

Her heart was in her throat; her pulses seemed to cease beating.

Yes, yes, *yes!*

Voices, men's voices, and steps approaching overhead—approaching rapidly, running down the little stone path, Overton calling out something as he turned the corner, and another—another answering.

The blood slowly left Matilda's cheek; her limbs shook beneath her as she rose from her seat; a blinding vision seemed to swim before her eyes; and then, "How do you do?" said a gentle voice with sweet composure, to the one. Then to the other of the two, "You must have had a dusty journey. The servants told you where I was?"

"Matilda," said her brother, taking her hand in his,—  
"Matilda, this is a friend whom I have brought to see you. I have brought him, it remains for *you* to keep him here." He took a long look in her face, and put the hand in that of Challoner.

Before either of them could raise their eyes from the ground, he was gone.

"Was I wrong to come?" said Challoner at last. "He tempted me, God bless him! and I—I was too weak to resist. I have always been too weak to resist. Wherever and however I am, a word from you, a chance of seeing you, must needs bring me. And if I now might dare to hope that those presumptuous hours could ever be forgiven—Matilda—Matilda!" Ere he had finished, he held her weeping in his arms.

"And you *forgive?*" said he presently, in a low and almost awe-stricken tone. "You whom I so cruelly wronged, so shamefully loved. You, Matilda, so proud.

so stainless ; you—you care for *me*—even for *me* ? Listen, I have led a wretched, worthless, useless life,—and since you cast me off, rightly cast me off, a miserable one. I am sick of it, ashamed of it, loathe it. I don't want to live and die like a dog. You don't know, you can't think, women like you, what it is to let go a hold upon everything that keeps a man from sinking down to the dregs, down to the bottomless pit. It is months since I have gone through even the form of a prayer, or heard the name of God. Respectable well-doing young fellows keep away from me ; I am not good company for such as them. People who liked me well enough once, have forgotten what I was like then. I am lean and shabby-looking, I know, but I don't think my appearance can have altered so very much in a twelvemonth, do you ? No, it is not that. They don't *choose* to know me ; it is convenient to have forgotten. My own family—well, I don't trouble them, and they are grateful to me for that. I go my own way ; I am alone in the world. You know it ? What ? You have heard, you had already learned all this, and still ? Oh you angel of mercy, you don't shrink from me ?—Ah, don't weep,—is it because you love me ? My God ! is it possible you still so love me ? Matilda, before heaven, I have told you all. Bad as I am, I am not utterly foul. I may dare to touch you. My wife—if indeed you will be my wife—need not fear that there has ever been or ever will be more to tell. And should I take this hand, this dear hand, before the altar,” —a sob stuck in his throat, she could only catch a word here and there—“ forgiveness—pardon—my Maker——”

“ I shall never be worthy of you,” said Challoner, again, “ but I will strive day by day to be less unworthy. And you, my dearest, you,” looking at her,—“ you are paler, thinner. You sadly need taking care of. I shall take such charge of you——”

"Yes," said Matilda, with her own smile, "I want a tyrant."

"You miss *him*, don't you?" whispered Challoner, softly.

"Miss him? Oh," cried Matilda, raising her head from his shoulder—"oh that silence, when every dumb thing seems to speak of my boy; when every spot I go to reminds me of him, when there are all his things about, when his poor dog follows me from place to place—it would never come to me before," said Matilda, weeping, "and now it lies outside his door, keeping watch still for a master who never comes! Oh how I miss him! Oh, speak of him, speak of him! I have had no one, no one all this time; Overton, dear kind Overton is so affectionate to me! but he thinks,—he feels,—it is almost a merciful relief to him at times that poor Teddy is not here. Teddy *did* trouble him—he *was* a care; but then I loved him so. I would give anything to talk and talk, and ease the pain."

"My poor darling."

By-and-by it was,—*"Matilda, you can't think how I long to hear what no one but you can tell me—the history of that terrible day. Was it," holding her close to his heart—"was it Teddy who told you?"*

"Yes."

"How had he heard?"

"He had been sent to find out. Yes, he had been sent," said Matilda, lifting up her face suddenly flushed. "Who do you think had sent him? Mr Whewell. That spy." (No words can express the scorn with which she said "That spy.") "He had had the—the—he had dared to make use of my poor boy,"—and she gave at full length her version, her woman's version of the story.

"He was right," said Challoner, when he had heard all; "he was right. It was the thing to do."

"Right!" Matilda looked her amazement.

"Yes," reiterated he, sadly. "He saw you were being deceived, and he knew it would not do to open your eyes on mere hearsay, so he sent your brother to find out the truth direct. He was right to do it."

"Right! I will never speak to him again. And it is he who has been the informant—he has poisoned the minds of the Hanwells—through him Overton heard about you—he tried to stir us up against you—he——"

"——Then to him I owe everything," said Challoner, with a smile.

Poor Matilda! she never could get those two lazy men to share her animosities with any proper degree of energy. They laughed at the notion of turning their backs on Whewell from that time forth; they were placidly indifferent to the impertinent amazement and almost open outcry which Challoner's recall occasioned at Endhill; and—but we anticipate.

Let us take one more peep at the little nook under the cliff on that enchanted evening when Paradise was regained for two who had erewhile been so rudely thrust from it. Gradually, as the time passed on, a great calm stole over the mind of each; there was no longer the sense of passionate emotion vibrating to every tone and touch—a solemn gladness, a wondrous peace filled two hearts to overflowing; all concealment, all estrangement was for ever at an end between them; forgiveness meant joy unspeakable,—even above every earthly joy; for the hand that held out the healing balm stanchd by the act its own wound, and all that that moment meant for time and for eternity was summed up in Challoner's concluding words, "You have saved me." . . .

The sun was sinking in the west, when at length the pair, thus for ever reunited, were seen approaching the house, Matilda, as no mortal eye had ever before beheld her, leaning her slender form on the strong arm of another; Challoner gravely and tenderly bending over

her, both rather subdued and pale, but with a great joy written on their faces.

"Well?" said Lord Overton, going to meet them and taking a hand of each with a shy smile,—“well? How is it to be? Is it to be peace between you two? Well, Challoner? Well, Matilda?”

"Yes, peace," said Matilda.

"You will be very happy," said her brother, simply, "and you will make him happy. I am glad I went to-day. And you,"—to his friend,—“you will just hang up your hat on its old peg, and never take it away any more. We shall get on first-rate, we three. We will go over to Endhill to-morrow and tell them the news. Of course they will be pleased, and the Applebys too.” He was not without a sense of humour; and Teddy gone, he had himself of late been the object of plaintive attempts at fascination in that quarter. “Everybody will be pleased,” said Overton, smiling. “It’s a nice evening, isn’t it? Of course you will not take Matilda away from me, old fellow? What is mine is hers, you know, and if I go first, she will have everything out-and-out some day, now that she is the only one left,—so you cannot do better than be on the spot all along. It’s a nice old place, too,”—looking around with loving pride,—“a nice old place on a night like this.”

"Oh," said Challoner, gazing, not on the glowing landscape, not on the gleaming uplands and spreading beeches, but on Matilda’s lovely face, now all suffused with love and happiness,—“oh, if you could ever think, if you could ever know what it is to me *on a night like this!*”



## POSTSCRIPT CHAPTER.

"For time makes all but true love old,  
The burning thoughts that then were told,  
Run molten still in memory's mould  
And will not cool,  
Until the heart itself be cold  
In Lethe's pool."

Let us lift the curtain for one moment yet again.

Another eighteen months are gone by, and it is another evening—this time an early spring evening—at the Hall.

Two quiet men sit together smoking contentedly under the trees outside; here and there a remark on the unusual mildness of the month and of the pleasure of being able thus to enjoy it, a word on family matters, or on the farm, or the estates—any little thing that either thinks of at the moment—make up the amount of all that passes between them. They understand one another, seldom find much to say, but are always at ease in each other's company.

But see! a voice calls from an upper window, and the scene changes. A merry, laughing, frolicsome babe is being held up for the father and uncle to see—shouts of glee come through the open casement—the boy beats his hand on the window—Overton claps his in return—Challoner cocks his walking-stick as a make-believe gun to shoot the rascal.

Gesticulations, repudiation, fist-shaking from the window. The two outside smile at the mimic indignation of the infant, and the enthusiasm of the fair nurse. "Come out, Matilda; come out," cries Challoner, beckoning.

She cannot come that moment, will join them presently, and by-and-by she flits forth through the garden door—baby has gone to sleep; he was in his little night-gown when she held him up, did they not see?—and as she sits

down between the two, Challoner rises to place her, as though she had been a queen on her throne, and then he throws himself on the grass at her feet, and she feels his hand clasp hers beneath the folds of her dress.

"How well this marriage has turned out!" comments Overton to himself, as he sits approvingly by; they never want him to go away at these times—he knows he is always welcome, and somehow he remains in the family circle more and more; and it is only when Matilda goes to her own little boudoir and Challoner follows her there, that he turns off into the library as he used to do, and waits until some social call brings them together again. "How well this marriage has turned out, and what a brave girl Matilda was to venture upon it! Not one in a thousand would have been generous enough to forgive as she did, and hopeful enough to trust him as she did." (He takes no credit to himself, he forgets almost altogether that he had any hand in the affair,—but that is Lord Overton's way.) "And now how happy we all are," he concludes, "and what a good fellow Jem Challoner is! I never knew a better fellow. What is he saying now? Matilda's picture? Matilda's picture with the young un in her arms? Come, that's natural enough. I'll have that done. It ought to have been thought of before.

"But now she wants his? Oh, now, that's another story. I don't know about your ugly phiz, Jem, my boy. Stop, though, *is* it ugly? Hang me! with that look upon it—he is like a devotee at a shrine, a worshipper before a saint,—pronouncing critically now upon that fellow's face, I declare the look that is in it makes the whole face beautiful."

"Jem, Overton is staring at you," cries Matilda, merrily. "Is anything wrong with Jem, Overton?"

Overton laughs, shakes his head, turns away his eyes, and goes on with his soliloquy.

"Nothing is wrong with him; everything is right. He

is wrapped up in his wife, well off in his home, at peace in his own heart. He has one little son already——”

“Overton, Overton, am I to obey Jem or not?”

“Of course you are to obey Jem.”

“He says it is growing too cold for me, and I am as warm as possible.”

“The wind has changed,” says Jem. “I am going to take her in,” and passing his arm round her waist, he draws her away without another word.

“And quite right too,” observes Overton, commending the scene. “Jem must not give way in *everything*. I shall make a point of upholding him whenever they appeal to me. That wilful creature——” And he laughs with pleasure.

For Matilda is Matilda still.

“New years new graces still create,”

and to the end of the chapter there will still remain all the conflicting, puzzling, enchanting characteristics of

THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER.

THE END.





